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TOWARDS THE WEST

THE great French novelist, author of the Goncourt prize novel, A MAN SCANS HIS PAST, has been called the successor to Jack London. But to his stories of primitive life in the Northwest he brings a French understanding of passion. . . .

His new novel has as its exciting background the rebellion of the French Canadians against the English and wars with the Sioux Indians. . . .

But it is the story mainly of Jeremy, simple-hearted and courageous son of the wilds, and his beautiful sweetheart. To win a wealth of furs with which to pay the bride money for her, he takes the lone trail into the North.

After extraordinary adventures he returns to find everything gone wrong, his sweetheart betrayed, trouble with the Indians, and other disasters.

How he sets things to right by his simple-
hearted faith and lion hearted courage
makes as thrilling and epical a
tale of American life as has
been written in
many years.





Towards the West

by MAURICE CONSTANTIN-WEYER
Author of A MAN SCANS HIS PAST
(*Goncourt Prize Award*), and THE HALF-BREED

New York
THE MACAULAY COMPANY



Published in France under the title:

"VERS L'OUEST"

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By THE MACAULAY COMPANY

Printed in the United States of America

TOWARDS THE WEST



I

NEWs of it had come the evening before, through a runner sent in advance by the Sioux chief. They had seen him arrive on a little piebald horse, the saddle blanket wet with foam under the pressure of the rider's legs. A toothless hag had withdrawn the pipe from her mouth to indicate to the stranger the house, or rather the cabin, of Riel. Neighbors of the great half-breed, whom they honored by the title of captain and who was indeed chieftain of the colony, saw him confer an instant with the savage. Then the latter had galloped away into the southwest. And, almost immediately, the news had run, flown, that the Wolf, the Sioux chief, followed by twenty picked warriors, was on his way to offer the half-breeds terms of a durable and honest peace. It was known also that Riel, the same evening, had gone to visit Monseigneur Provencher at the poor little

chapel, through the ill-jointed boards of which blew the full winds of Red River. Then he had visited the governor of the Hudson Bay Company at Fort Garry and, finally, had drawn up with the elders a program for receiving the plenipotentiaries.

Saint Boniface, opposite Fort Garry and the confluence of Red River and the Assiniboine, had been set as the place of rendezvous with the savages, at an hour when shadows are least—noonday.

From Pointe aux Chênes, Saint Vital, Grande Pointe, Saint Norbert, from Fort Rouge, Kildonan and Winnipeg, the half-breeds were hastening over the muddy roads, the men on horses, the women in the carts, all bringing with them provisions for the day, all singing, shouting, exchanging jokes with Ritchott, the ferryman at the river. From time to time they would gather in threes and fours behind the willow clumps to give themselves the pleasure of a swallow of whiskey drunk from the same gourd with the usual salutation in the Cree tongue:

"Tatemicchkatin (hail)."

"Kiminicoue nichta (drink, brother)."

They would, moreover, in the course of the conversation, pass from Cree to a Canadian-French jargon,

from Canadian-French to Chippewa, from Chippewa to Sioux and, occasionally, to honor a half-breed of Scottish origin, to English, which they spoke badly and generally with dislike.

Most of them, to be grand, had donned long blouses which their women had cut from the checkered blankets bought in the stores of the Hudson Bay Company. They drew themselves in at the waist with belts knitted of many-colored silk. Others wore hunting jackets of smoked natural skin, embroidered with designs of variously tinted glass beads and decorated with long fringe. All had the pointed moccasins common to the prairie, and big black felt hats.

The women wore cotton stuffs in soft rose and blue and for shawls carried bright-hued woolen blankets. Their thick black hair, coarse and straight, parted and falling in heavy braids on either side the face; their bridled eyes, black and sharp; their bronzed faces with prominent cheek bones; their noses, some flat, others angular or curved, spoke more clearly of Indian blood than did the features of the men, so much so in fact that the few squaws, borne off from their tribes by some adventurous hunter, differed from the half-breeds in their diffi-

culty in understanding the French most of the men spoke in compliance with the wishes of the missionaries. They would answer in Cree, Sioux, Chippewa, or even in the raucous and harsh Eskimo jargons which seemed to have brought into the language all the rudeness of the climates of the North and all the cold of those immense and marshy plains, where there were neither mountains nor forests.

By turn, according to age or the seasons, shepherds or farmers on the banks of Red River, where they lived with the French missionaries; buffalo hunters on the prairies, where they encountered more or less peacefully the Sioux, the Cree or the Blackfeet; trappers or employees of The Far North Company where lived the Montagnais and the Eskimos, the men were, all of them, remarkable polyglots. And since ordinarily they were chatterers, a characteristic which betrayed the drop of Celt blood in them, difficulties of grammar and syntax did not hold them back.

Having crossed the river, the men unsaddled or unharnessed their horses, tying them with halters to the axle-trees of the carts. They took care to find places where the grass was abundant, high and thick,

that the horses might have something to eat. Now and then two ponies tied too near one another would flatten their ears and bite, disputing the provender savagely.

In the wooden church which lifted its humble cross over the colony, Monseigneur Provencher was celebrating mass. And all of them, respectful and meditative, whether they were of the little group of happy first arrivals packed together on their knees in the too-small chapel, or whether they were of the prostrated crowd about the doors, all of them were silent. At the moment of the sermon, the prelate advanced to the open space in front of the church, whence he could make himself heard by the faithful inside as well as by those outside. From on high his giant's frame dominated his kneeling flock. Speaking by turn in French and Cree, he celebrated the peace which that day would be reborn on the vast prairies of the West. Then he recalled to his hybrid people that, as with a sainted race, he himself, also, was elected of God, reserved for a great task: that of spreading over savage lands civilization and the blessed word. In recompense for which God would assure his children sovereignty over this promised

land and he would bless their harvests and their lineage.

While the bishop was thus promising a brilliant destiny to his people, Riel could not hold back his pride. Of a finer metal than most of the other half-breeds, knowing how to read—which was in itself a rarity—and being besides a robust handsome man, a great hunter and a brave warrior, he had been chosen in bygone times captain, or rather chieftain supreme. He and the bishop ruled. He knew how to conquer and to reduce to silence the advice of his elders, and even with the governor of the powerful Hudson Bay Company, his word had weight. He dreamed one day of the title of king, in spite of the opposition sometimes offered his authority by Norquay, MacDermot and Jérôme. This dream was kept secret from all but his confessor, who blamed him for the sin of pride and exhorted him to humility. Riel would accept with restless contrition the sermon of the missionary. Then, penitence done, he would return to his dream. He had recently obtained from the bishop a promise that his son, called Louis after himself, would receive a careful education in some college. And as the voice of the prelate went on, Riel

grew prouder and prouder in his mind of the rôle to which he was destined, for he knew that the peace they would conclude this day was his own.

The war was an old one, very old. Its cause, like its beginnings, had grown dim with the years. The Sioux and the half-breeds alike accused each other for the first murder, committed one no longer knew where, because of the unfortunate killing of a buffalo. Was it a half-breed who had struck down an Indian on the Sioux hunting ground, or had an Indian killed a half-breed on the domain of the Bois-Brûlés? A man had died, was all that now could be remembered. Then, on both sides, murder had begotten murder, and the buffalo hunters were transformed into soldiers, the Sioux into bandits; men were scalped, women violated and stolen; fires, spread by a favorable wind, had turn by turn driven the buffalo herds from one territory to the other until the time when Riel, by wise tactics, had carried terror into the Indian lodges, persuading the principal chief of the Sioux to an alliance, or at least to an agreement. Already they were living in peace with the Crees, the Chippewas, the Blackfeet, for the few isolated murders committed between these and the

half-breeds over a trap line visited by someone who had no business to be there, or over a band of horses borrowed by some indelicate vagabond—such misunderstandings were settled according to convenience and followed by courteous excuses which took away from the regrettable accidents all appearance of hostility. . . . Yes, the hour of peace had come, and soon Riel, before all the people, could demand the title of king.

These were his dreams as he listened to the mass.

Toward midday, a young man dispatched as a scout announced the arrival of the Indian plenipotentiaries.

The word sped from mouth to mouth; soon, instinctively, the men grouped themselves in a body around their chieftain. The tribal urge, the instinct for family, heritage from their Indian mothers and grandmothers, was strong. Also, on great occasions, they rallied instinctively to the patronymic.

Riel knew them all.

The Ritchotts, gigantic and strong, with slightly sloping shoulders, face narrow, head pointed, nose almost straight, with hair black and coarse; their grandfather had been a Blackfoot from the vales of

the prairies bordering the Rocky Mountains. There were the Lapointes, some of them blond like their grandfather who had died several years before, and tall as he was tall; others of them were swart, thick-set, small, true Chippewas from the Lake of The Woods, no one of them liking whiskey less than the other. The Goulets were there, whom Riel held in high esteem for their intelligence and their uprightness. Then he saw the Maurins, whose strength was proverbial and who were known to be fierce when they had taken whiskey. He saw the Gosselin men, who from father to son were the finest violin players on the prairie. The Dusseaumes, bright blond hair and wild eyes, who were born epileptic and died mad; their father was not among them; he had had two or three seizures, after which his eldest son, in spite of the remonstrances of the archbishop, kept him chained to his bedstead. There were the Ouelettes, horse-dealers; the Delormes, clever hunters; the Dumonts, fine marksmen and the most warlike of all; and the Dumas, who from father to son told the same coarse jokes which made the shriveled squaws laugh and the young girls blush. Riel saw the Jérômes, politic and crafty, whom he mistrusted

for their ambition and unscrupulousness; the Lespérance clan who had inherited a Sioux grandmother's passion for stealing horses—so said wicked tongues, which probably did wrong only to the Sioux. And in the crowd were the half-breeds of English tongue, for the most part Scotch: the MacIvors, types of the whole varied Indian race, because their ancestor, once mate on a whaler and afterwards in the service of the Company, had practiced at his post in the North the most prolific polygamy. Legend tells of his women of all races and that it was left to him, in his search for wives, to discover a tribe of white Eskimos, the existence of which ethnography had hoped for but doubted. Then came the Kiplings, purest type of Eskimo in the colony; and the fair Langens and the Prudens; and at last Riel's eyes came to rest on the MacDermots who were joined with the Grants and the Jérômes in hate for him. . . .

At last the Sioux appeared, galloping their little piebald ponies. They came up in close order, their spears, decked with red painted scalps, and the wolves' tails hanging along their legs, marking them all of high rank. At a sign from their chief, gallop-

ing in advance, they halted their mounts suddenly and sprang to the ground, tying their bridles to their lances, which they thrust upright into the earth. To make plain their desire for peace, the narrow shaggy shields of buffalo hide, scarcely wider than the arm, and two feet long, were left hanging to the saddles, together with the bows and arrows or the muskets which were their arms for charging or defense. They kept with them only their knives. But these latter were as much used for cutting meat and mincing tobacco as for taking the scalp of an enemy. Borne openly in the hand of the chief was a hatchet decorated with strips of skin embroidered with beads and shells. This, Riel knew, was the emblem of hostility which, following the rites of peace, they would bury. The youngest of the Indians stood back with the horses, to keep them quiet.

The Wolf, followed by his nineteen warriors, came forward. They had washed from their faces all signs of war paint. Wearing their finest garments, blouses and leggings of soft skin over-wrought with colored figures designed by the squaws, the Indians advanced. Clasp ing his shoulders, a long Buffalo robe trailed on the heels of the chief, and with a

movement of the leg, he would cast off the wolves' tails lest in walking he tread upon them.

Many of the half-breeds had already met the Wolf and the greater part of the warriors accompanying him. But on those occasions the savages had been naked, smeared with ochre and hair beplumed; and those of the half-breeds who had seen them thus realized suddenly what this day had cost in lives and blood. Twice the elder Joseph Dumont, the infallible sharpshooter, had taken aim at the Wolf and twice his musket had missed fire. Hence, among the devoutly trusting and yet more superstitious half-breeds, the conviction that the Wolf had concluded a pact with the devil.

Curious, they pressed around him. Riel, in impatience, was obliged to thrust aside several old men. He was able then to rest his two hands in greeting on the shoulders of the savage, who made a gesture in return. The two men looked for a moment into the other's eyes, and each of them, strong and both well built, thought he would profit by this glance to measure the other. Riel was mortified to realize that the eyes of the Sioux dominated his own by the breadth of two fingers. But he consoled himself in

calculating that his own frame, more massive, was at least twenty pounds heavier than that of the Indian.

Side by side, the two men advanced toward the hall which Monseigneur Provencher had put at the disposal of the Council. Built of square logs, the episcopal chapel was a humble construction about twenty-four feet wide and thirty long. The one story of the little building was divided into two rooms of equal grandeur, and of these the prelate had granted the larger.

The walls of the room were whitewashed and bore no ornament except a plain large wooden crucifix before which the half-breeds crossed themselves. This gesture appeared strange to the savages.

It had been agreed that only Riel and twelve chosen lieutenants and the Wolf and twelve of his warriors would take part in the deliberations. All others left the council room.

It was necessary, however, to eat. A great feast had been prepared: boiled ears of corn, butter, steamed potatoes, roast beef, maple treacle, to all of which the Indians did honor. Many of the savages who had remained without had relatives among the

wives of the half-breeds. They were greeted on every side.

The Wolf himself had a niece in the colony, a little Dubois. The father of the child led her to her uncle. She began to cry:

"I don't want to be the niece of a savage! . . . I don't want to be the niece of a savage! He isn't my uncle."

The Wolf laughed haughtily and turned his back on her. Dubois, acting on suggestions from Riel, pushed the child with kicks toward his wagon. Her cries at once drew all the old women, and one of them consoled her by giving her a pipe, all filled and lighted.

* * *

Meanwhile the deliberations began.

Riel and the Wolf lit pipes and exchanged them. For several minutes, each, as was the custom, smoked in silence. This allowed for reflection. Then the Wolf put down his calumet and arose.

In simple language, ordering his thought and reasoning perfectly, he recalled how the Sioux had once courteously welcomed the fathers of the half-breeds. They had invited them to join the buffalo

hunts, they had given them their daughters in marriage. . . . Then when the whites and the half-breeds had announced their intention of settling on the banks of Red River, the Sioux had agreed to respect the chosen territory of their friends. Thereupon it had been fixed that the Sioux would hunt south of the hills of Pembina, west of the Yellow Meadow fen, and on to the land of the Blackfeet, the Piekanes and the Crows, while the whites and the half-breeds would have as their own the buffalo herds which wandered between the Assiniboine, the hills, and the fen. All would have been well if each had been content to kill only for food. (At these words, several half-breeds, feeling themselves directly singled out, frowned; the chief continued without appearing to have noticed them.) The Hudson Bay Company was the first cause of the injury. Endlessly demanding hides of the buffalo, the result was that certain hunters, (Janvier Ritchott stared angrily at the chief) not content to kill for meat, had begun to slaughter for hides, as if the fur of the wolf, the bear and the lynx were not for the purpose of protecting man against the cold. And then, while the herds roaming the country of the Sioux multiplied, in spite

of the great hunts and the needs of a people twenty times greater—the chief stood tenaciously by the figure: yea, twenty times greater than the half-breed—while the herds of the Sioux increased, the half-breeds saw their game diminish. One day, on the very hunting ground of the Sioux, a half-breed spilled the first blood. (The assembly began to stir menacingly; Riel calmed his men with a gesture and signed to the Wolf to continue. The savage nodded his thanks.) The Sioux had not come to perpetuate the war, but rather to bring peace with them. It was not the intention of the Wolf to dwell on the ancient griefs. But they were worth citing for the sake of remembrance. Blood had been spilled on both sides, and this blood had washed away many things. The half-breeds even now had just overstepped their own land and spread their tents on the banks of the Bourbeuse among the Wood of The Willows far west of the Yellow Meadow fen. (The Hamlins, the Boxers, the younger Gosselin, old Lagrue, were those who had migrated, despite the remonstrances of Riel.) In compensation for the slain and as a token of friendship the Wolf now offered to the people of Riel (the half-breeds stiffened), offered to extend

their hunting ground to this same Bourbeuse, on whose banks the first blood had run red.

Riel had triumphed. It was a distinguished success, this extension of the hunting grounds of the half-breeds. The portals were opening on all his ambitions to the westward, to the feet of the Rocky Mountains, where later it was his plan to negotiate peace with the Blackfeet. Janvier Ritchott, impetuous as usual, had not been satisfied with the promise of the Wolf. Judging others by himself, he was persuaded that negotiators never offer at first all they will finally agree to abandon, especially when the traders are savages.

He cried:

"A fine gift! The chief offers what we already have. Who of us hasn't hunted as far as the Bourbeuse?"

"By what right?" the Wolf said quietly.

"By right of the strongest."

"Right of the strongest," sneered the Wolf. "Yes, I can see thou art partly white. That is always the manner of the whites . . . the strongest . . . armed with guns against our poor arrows, the Long Knives presume to talk like masters. . . . And

thou, what wilt thou say when these shall come to demand thy country—by right of the strongest?”

“I am white, too . . . you said as much. . . .”

“White! . . . Yes, in honesty. Take and give nothing in exchange. If thou dividest the forest, thou takest the trees to warm thine ownself and to me thou leavest the shadows. But thou shalt see how white thou art, the day when the Long Knives covet thy land. Thou knowest what they will say! They will say: ‘Cursed savage!’ And thou shalt remember—too late—that thy mother’s mother was of my race.”

“I—a cursed savage?”

“Thou speakest too many tongues: the tongue of the whites and the tongue of the red men. Also thou hast two skins—a white and a red. As for me, the color of thy skin is nothing. But come the Long Knives, they will say to thee: ‘Thy white skin is rather thin, brother, and full of holes. The red shows through.’ I have spoken.”

And the chieftain sat down.

Riel rose to his feet, and there was none dared lift a voice, for he had just settled an angry glance on Janvier Ritchott. The captain of the half-breeds

knew the Wolf was not a man who made two propositions. For what reason was he offering peace? Riel believed it was but a prelude to seeking an alliance against the Long Knives, and that one day or another the Sioux chief would come beseeching the aid of the dauntless carbines of the half-breeds. It could be decided then, according to the circumstances, what answer must be given. . . . At the moment, the Wolf could mount four or five hundred horsemen, perhaps more. And although a hundred half-breeds, behind the shelter of their wagons, felt themselves of a strength to repulse such an army, nevertheless. . . . It was fatiguing, after hunting afar, the consoling of widows and the adopting of orphans. Riel feared for the adventurous colonists along the banks of the Bourbeuse, some of whom were well descended. He himself was leagued with the Hamlins, and his wife, Marie Lajimonnière, was the sister-in-law of a Gosselin. The safety of these must be considered.

Using the Sioux tongue almost as purely as the Wolf spoke it, Riel replied in simple words that his people had decided to accept the offer of the great chief, that the hatchet could be buried that same

afternoon. He knew that this rite was the assurance of peace.

Monseigneur Provencher came into the room. He had just celebrated vespers. He expressed a wish to say a few words in private to the Sioux chief. The others at once went outside, to put their heads together in intimate discussion.

The great frame of the bishop surprised the savage. He had never seen a man so stalwartly tall, and he expressed a childlike regret that the prelate had not followed the career of a warrior and a hunter. Flattered in his heart, the bishop smiled. Then coming straight to the point, he asked if the Sioux would receive the visit of a missionary when peace was concluded.

"We will feed him, if he is hungry," said the Wolf. "We will clothe him if he is cold, but speak he shall not."

"And why?" asked the bishop.

"I know a little thy religion. It asks of a man to share his goods with the poor. That, we do. To turn the cheek to a blow, that we do not. We speak on bended knee to none. We are tall enough to stand upright . . . and then, if my sons followed the

counsel of thy messengers, they would know less how to defend themselves. . . . As for becoming better——”

He paused and smiled:

“Thy God forbids stealing. Thy people steal my lands and my buffaloes, and the Long Knives, followers of the same law, are yet greater thieves. Thy God forbids taking a neighbor’s wife, and I have been told that here, on Red River. . . . But I do not wish to give you pain, Father, but just to tell why I, the Wolf, do not wish your messenger to preach a law that makes slaves of those who follow it.”

“And in the other world?”

“Not thou, not I, none there is who know what waits in the Happy Hunting Ground. . . . There has come here a messenger *matchi*.” (He was trying to say methodist, and the bishop promptly understood him.)

“But,” he interrupted, “the *matchi* have bad doctrines.”

The savage began to laugh. Excellent polyglot, he passed from the Sioux tongue to the Cree, for the sole reason of making a play on words:

"Yes, I believe truly they are *matchi*," he said, for *matchi* means wicked in Cree.

In spite of the sadness his failure as an apostle caused him, the bishop could not keep from laughing.

"Is this all thou wished to ask me?" said the savage.

"Yes."

"Then let us go bury the hatchet!"

* * *

A ditch almost six feet deep had been prepared. They could not go any deeper since the water, already near, was beginning to seep in. The chief courteously expressed regret at the circumstance. He hoped however that the depth was sufficient to keep the hatchet from disinterring itself.

Riel and the Wolf descended into the pit. They placed the hatchet blade down, as the rites demanded, so that the cutting edge plainly would be turned away from men. They had scarcely thrown on the first shovelfuls of earth when a young man came running and, disregarding all oratorical precautions, informed Riel that a murder had just been committed. On the instant, the Wolf saw that one of the youngest warriors of his escort failed his call.

"Who has killed him?" Riel demanded in French.

The half-breed answered in the Cree tongue, language which the Sioux chief understood perfectly.

"Joe Ouelette—he killed one of the savages. It was Joe Ouelette!"

Riel swore fiercely. Out of the ditch in one leap, with the chief at his heels and followed pell-mell by the crowd, he hurried toward the house of Joe Ouelette.

The half-breed's wife, a young Sioux woman, carried off from her tribe two years before, was filling the cabin with shrieks which passed mournfully through the open door and into the distance. Riel and the chief entered. The body of the slain Indian first met their eyes. The warrior's right eye had received the ball, a pistol ball, and the blood had spattered the whole lower part of his face. Only the brow, like polished copper, remained fair and spotless. The body lay as if asleep, the feet outstretched. The weeping squaw was cowering in a corner, her back turned sullenly. Only her neck and the black braids of her hair could be seen. Joe Ouelette, with a look of bestial defiance on his round, flat face—he was called Tepiscaou Peschine, the full moon—

was standing upright, regarding his work with a triumphant and besotted air.

But the expression changed swiftly when Riel, without asking the slightest explanation, stretched him with a single blow to the jaw on the floor beside his victim.

The blow was well delivered, and Joe Ouelette lay sleeping, as the half-breeds had a way of saying, until Riel threw in his face a bucket of water that by good luck happened to be near.

At length the half-breed pulled himself up, his hair dripping, his jaw tumid and visibly swelling. His manner had become humble and piteous. Riel questioned him.

"That's the savage," said Ouelette, "had my wife w'en she was a girl. Come back to see her. I don' want any damned li'l Sioux bastards in my house, so I kill him."

"Then you caught them at it?"

"No, but they were talking a li'l too tender to suit me."

"You've done a foul thing, my son of a slut!"

Whereupon the Wolf spoke up to demand that the murderer be handed over to him.

"No," Riel said bluntly.

In truth, he realized the justice of the Wolf's demand, and he could have willingly killed with his own hands this brute of a Joe Ouelette. But he knew that the pride of the half-breeds and their clansmanship would not tolerate this concession to the Wolf.

"Then judge him before me," said the chief, fairly. "He has killed an unarmed man. Look, my son had not even a knife."

As he spoke he lifted the warrior's tunic and there could be seen, prominent under the skin, the arched chest bones. His stomach had flattened.

"He killed an unarmed man," the Wolf repeated. "He must die."

Riel heard the scoffing voice of Norquay.

"Let's see if he's going to have the heart to hand over one of our own to these savages," said the English half-breed.

"*Beau dommage!*" replied Jérôme. "No pity for anybody, those lads."

"Let him be judged," insisted the Wolf.

"No," Riel said again.

He was irritated and ashamed.

The Sioux chief made no further sound. Draping his mantle about him, he made a sign to his braves and two of them lifted the body. With measured step, they carried him to the horses, put him across his pony and fastened him there with thongs, placing on him his shield and spear.

Then the braves lifted to the saddles and galloped serenely away.

Joyous calls greeted their departure. But Riel knew that all hopes of peace departed with them on the floating folds of their robes.



He wandered alone on the banks of Red River until evening.

The beautiful river that rolls toward the North the rich waters of territories beyond the valley of the Mississippi, hurling them into Lake Winnipeg and from there, by a hundred wild streams cut with rapids, into the glacial bay of the Hudson; the beautiful river bordered with verdant willows, with tortuous oaks and the blue grass of the prairies—it was not beautiful enough to turn his mind from the blow that had just fallen.

So many plans, so carefully laid, so well built up,

were crumbling at a single blow, because a clumsy churl—Riel knew the whole romance—had carried off the wife of a young Sioux, converting her to Catholicism and making her his wife before the church. And the first husband had returned—luckless time—to see his wife and to make her, without doubt, God knew what proposition! As to that, Riel cared little. The imbecile had done better by far to forget his infidel. But, above all, the half-breed chieftain was enraged at the hare-brained and brutal murderer who at a single shot had undoubtedly wiped out all hope.

Returning to his cabin, Riel ate in a troubled silence the meal his wife, Marie, had prepared for him. Broiled bacon, pancakes with maple syrup, raspberry preserves covered with sweet cream, hot teacake on which the butter was melting—all of it he swallowed avidly, with a sullen air. Ordinarily he was gentle with his wife; but this evening he pushed her from him brutally and, instead of going to bed, fell asleep in an old rocking chair.

Toward midnight he awoke. Dogs were barking.

Riel opened the door. Above in the black night trembled the stars. He turned his ear to the wind.

Already the dogs were quieting. He thought he could hear the far-off galloping of a horse.

Lost in thought, his hair disheveled, he stood until morning with his wide burning brow leaning on the cool window panes.

When the aurora began to pale the sky and the east showed a soft rose fog over the crest of the distant forest, Riel went out.

Twenty steps from his cabin an object was swinging from the main branch of a solitary oak. He approached. It was a sheaf of arrows, the point of which had been dipped in fresh blood—without doubt the blood of some young Sioux warrior.

Riel took this emblem of war in his hand.

He went toward the place where last evening they had buried the symbolic hatchet. The ground was freshly disturbed. On a little hillock was the hatchet, blade toward the sky.

War was once more declared.



II

IT was already late when Riel succeeded in gathering the council to inform them of this new rupture of peace. Norquay was the first to appear. His face was radiant, for news flies fast, and already he was aware of what had happened. Riel thought that, in spite of his haste to answer the call, Norquay had probably advised his friends Grant, MacDermot and Jérôme, who were not a part of the Council of Thirteen, and that he had probably dispatched them through the countryside to spread the news in the most unfavorable way for the half-breed chief.

Nevertheless Riel flattered himself that his established common sense, several staunch and faithful friendships, and, especially, his renown for bravery and great physical strength would preserve him, partly because of esteem, almost as much because of affection, and, above all, because of that quality of

respect that arises from wholesome fear—sufficient authority, he felt, to enable him one day sooner or later to revive anew his hopes for the future.

At the moment, the thing of greatest need must be looked to. Old Dubois was arriving accompanied by Jeremy, his nephew, who was leagued closely to Riel through the maternal strain—old Dubois, with his curious head of an Indian, white skin, and the bronze of his hair still not entirely lost in the hoary mane falling over his arched shoulders.

Young Jeremy Dubois had only recently returned to the settlements along Red River. He had come back from a journey of several years across the United States, where he had followed the life of a cowboy. In spite of his twenty-five years, he appeared scarcely eighteen, with his beardless face and lean body. Seeing him sway on his horse rigged out in Mexican fashion, with the tall saddle of stamped leather, shining steel pommel and cantle raised like a chair back, with stirrups trimmed with tapaderos, Riel thought at once of the little band of hunters who had gone early in the spring for buffalo to the prairies bordering the Yellow Meadow fen. The Sioux rarely adventuring into that region,

the hunters had taken their wives and children with them. But the insult of the night before was so grave that any audacity could be expected on the part of the Indians. The men along the Bourbeuse—they were indeed too far away, more than five hundred miles, and they were sure to be attacked before a messenger from Red River could get to them. Moreover, Riel knew that their leader, old Hamlin, was an experienced and prudent man, in spite of his boldness. Married to the sister of a Black-foot chief, he would be able, if hard pressed, to make an alliance with his brother-in-law, whose tribe was none too well disposed toward the Sioux. . . . But the hunters following Lespérance—they ran the risk of being taken unawares.

Riel knew they would be found quite probably not far from the edge of the great forest, a little west of the River of the Cypress. Buffalo herds, it was said, were plentiful there this year, a prairie fire in the spring having retarded the tender grass farther away to the south.

And so the half-breed chieftain called Jeremy to him:

“Listen well, son. You are to take three lads of

your own choice, and then you are to leave with them to find Lespérance's band. You will tell them war is declared again with the Sioux and they're to come back full speed. You'll leave as soon as you've gotten your arms. . . . For grub, you've only to stop by the house and tell Marie to give you some pemmican and tea. There's a good supply of beef. Take all you need. Understand?"

Jeremy thought a moment.

"And how much you say I get for this commission?"

"Not a cursed sou."

"And you think I'm going away out there for pretty words—"

"My lad! You don't work for the Company, do you? Then you're a soldier. You have only to obey. There's war—all hunters are soldiers."

"And who is it's going to make me obey if I don't want to?"

"Who is there, you ask?" And Riel showed his great gnarled fist, knuckles calloused, solidly backed up by a formidable forearm.

"Don't fear, uncle. I was just joking," said the young man, a little moved by the deep and ominous

tone which had accompanied this show of bone and muscle.

"Well, you are young, but it's not the time to laugh when there are lives to be saved. And it's an honor I'm doing you, do you hear, boy?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Good. Now, although I'm not rich enough to pay you, I tell you, just the same, that if you accomplish your mission, for it's a dangerous one, when you come back I'm going to give you a little two-year old bull. You have a good mare—and with the bull. . . . But you're making me forget I've got other things to do. Be off with you."

* * *

Jeremy had not gone a quarter of a mile in the direction of Riel's house when he encountered one of his comrades, Octave MacDoug, a short brawny fellow with slanting eyes, high cheek bones, flat nose, but peculiarly fair of skin and with blond beard, more Celt, in truth, than Indian.

Jeremy stopped his horse.

"You're not working, boy?"

MacDoug broke out laughing.

"No, look at my breeches." And he pointed to his

trousers full of rents, through which showed the whiteness of his great thighs. "I'm not shabby enough now?—without getting still shabbier working?"

"Always the same!" said Jeremy, laughing.

MacDougall appeared flattered by this appreciation of his wit. But he was used to that, however, and he was always invited to dances because he made laughter or, as the half-breeds said it, because he brought cheer. He went on to Jeremy:

"You work only when you've nothing else to do."

"Where you going?"

"Kill a few ducks to eat. With pancakes and a little butter—not bad when they're roasted done."

"I want to hire you."

"No offense meant, son, but I'd like to know what you're going to use for money. Old Mac, he don't work for nothing. He needs money for drink, and grub to feed him with."

"Don't worry. You'll have all that."

"It sounds strange, boy. I don't work for nothing and I don't like to be fooled. . . . But if you want a favor done, I don't say no. I never refuse a favor to a friend. Tell me you don't want to pay, if you

can't pay, but if you say you want to pay, then pay, fellow. No harm, you know."

"It's a favor. But you'll be paid, not by me, but by Riel."

"Yeah? He's good pay. And what's he want done?"

Jeremy explained the matter to him.

"But, Jerry, you know I haven't got a horse."

"A horse! You've only to take one of Riel's ponies. Just so you bring it back—"

"Say, do I look like a horse stealer? No offense meant, but it looks to me you must borrow right easy yourself, if you judge others like that. . . . Never mind"—he winked his eye—"I'm not going to ask you where you bought that beautiful plug you're mounted on, and that beautiful Mexican saddle. I'd rather not know what the price was."

"I got it in the States, don't worry."

"It's no fat off my back."

"You know well enough I paid for them."

"Then I suppose I believe you."

"Believe me or not—"

"Don't take on so. Go pick me out a pony at Riel's—and pick one you'd want yourself, a good

one, see. Make the old woman give you a lot of bully. There'll be four to eat on it. I'm going to hunt up two more lads."

"Who?"

"Hormidas Ouelette and Pete Delorme. They'll go. They've got horses, and nothing to do. And if it's war, they'd rather hunt hunters than fight the Sioux on those damned prairies to the south."

"But they may have to fight."

"Maybe—yes. But if they went with Riel, no maybe about it. And if we who've got no wives don't go with you, it won't be any use saying we don't want to be soldiers. You see if tomorrow all the others don't start south with Riel."

"I'd almost say you weren't very keen to fight, boy."

"And as for you, I suppose you think it's a nice calling to get yourself eaten by the wolves while your scalp's drying over the door of some Sioux's teepee. I know all about it. Riel's going to make the Sioux take a good drubbing. But when it's over, there's going to be somebody who's not coming back to tell a heap o' lies, how he killed a half a thousand savages with one shot, or how he

strangled their chief, and all those other whoppers a lad that's just been a soldier can string out for a whole night—till you fall asleep."

"But," repeated Jeremy, "we may have to fight where we are going, too."

"Count me in, then," said MacDoug. "It's not my stuff, but my heart's on the right side."

* * *

Jeremy quickly made preparations for the journey. He cut short the lamentations of Marie Riel and got out of her a good supply of her best pemmican, a little flour to make pancakes, a ball of fat, and some muskeg tea, harvested and cured at the best season. While packing the provisions, the woman grumbled about the assassination of the night before, about the declaration of war, about the dangers her husband must encounter again, and, above all, it seemed, about the squandering habit of Riel, who always gave away all he had.

"Your uncle Moïse, or better old Ritchott, or Préfontaine, who are so rich," she would say, "why don't they give? You see this bully? Last year they had four hundred miles to go and four hundred miles back to kill the cows and dry the meat, and

pound fat into it, and sew it up in raw skins, well fleshed and greased. You can believe it cost sweat to prepare all that."

And during this time, groaning the while, she was taking handfuls of the mixture of dried meat pounded with fat and dried fruits—the *taureau*—which she kneaded into a thick ball to be sewed up into a skin sack. Now and then she would stop to give a pellet of the confection to the fat, brown, round-faced babies playing under her skirts. With the tidbit in their fingers, they smeared their faces with grease before finding a way to their mouths.

"And you can see, you can see for yourself if I haven't enough to do with the papooses."

Moreover, she helped the young half-breed catch the pony for Octave MacDougall and when Jeremy said to her: "Good-by, aunty!" she embraced him tenderly.

Jeremy found his three companions, waiting and well armed, at the place they had named as a rendezvous.

All four were joyous at the thought of riding afar to adventure over the prairie, with a little less danger, they believed, than if they had been enrolled

in Riel's party. In reality, they were hoping not to meet with any Sioux, for, in that case, the position of four men would be desperate. But Jeremy's plan being to go through the forest, it was hardly probable such a misfortune would arise. There, they would have only to gallop freely, camp in the woods and from time to time feel themselves shaken by little chills, only half disagreeable, which would give a relish to other sensations.

A half-breed never trots his mount. He knows but two gaits—a walk or a gallop. The little bronchos of the prairie, somewhat narrow in the buttocks—though seldom do they have any obstacle to leap—broad of breast, are able hour by hour to sustain a moderate pace which, though appearing to be nothing, yet makes the miles fly from their shoes like clumps of turf.

Quickly leaving the forest that borders Red River, the riders struck out across the forty miles of marshy prairie which they had to cross before gaining the edge of the opposite forest and the Ormeaux trail where Jeremy wished to spend the night.

Guided by the color of the grass and the instinct of the horses, they skirted the bogs, wound around

the pools circled with rushes and avoided the treacherous holes of water hidden under the ruche of rotting leaves; they zigzagged on a firm terrain of dry clay, hardened and crackled by the sun.

At first they were amused to watch MacDouggs's pony, the pony of Riel, with his strange manner of galloping with his head down between his legs, as if trying to browse. Then they began to admire his cleverness in side-stepping—the first one almost unsaddled MacDouggs—anything that resembled a hole, slippery mud, or all that was not solid and sure ground.

Right and left, between the grasses, showed vistas of pools of all sizes, on which swam ducks and moor-hens. The bald-headed eagle and the curlew explored these stretches with circular wheelings, now and then falling like an arrow and again soaring, the chosen prey in their claws.

Then the ground became more uniformly dry, the grass less blue and, in the west, the fringe of the forest appeared in an indigo mist and grew large.

The sun hovered on the horizon, and it seemed to each rider that the head of the horse he mounted

was going to cut its silhouette in black from the center of the red disc. Then, as if pulled by an invisible cord, the star of all stars sank beyond the forest.

* * *

It would be too long to describe in detail how Jeremy and his three comrades took four days to pass through scarcely sixty miles of forest, which lay between the isles of wood and the River of the Cypress.

On the morning of the second day, as soon as they reached these woodland clumps which marked eastwardly the beginning of the forest, they determined from heavy cart tracks that Lespérance had turned obliquely to the south, meaning without doubt to cross the sharp Pemlinian hills by the Stag track and, climbing upward to the Lake of the Swans, skirt in a westerly direction the south slopes of the hills. This route would have been dangerous for the four scouts, for it could be presumed that outposts of the Sioux were already beating it in quest of adventure. And so they exerted themselves to find the old wagon track in the woods, safer in time of war, but so wild that, when they followed

it, they were obliged repeatedly to cross trunks of trees blown by the wind across the trail. And three times MacDougall had to recover his three companions, whose horses had been caught in the treacherous bogs—first in the marshes which lay cunningly at the foot of the hills, near the river of the Woodland Isles, then a little beyond the river, then again ten miles farther on. At nightfall, clouds of mosquitoes hummed and eddied and, in spite of the ‘boucan’ cleverly fashioned from great piles of green bark on the fire, they tormented men and horses. The ponies’ front feet were shackled with curious bracelets of tough wood bent into the shape of horseshoes and fastened with pegs. They hopped about clumsily on what was neither three feet nor four. Now and then they would stop browsing on the wild white peas and roll in the mud to protect themselves from the flies.

The men were indifferent to the magnificent bloom of June which covered the hills with red lilies and vermilion eglantine, which brought out the yellow lady’s-slippers in the glades, and rose lady’s-slippers and iris by the sylvan pools. But they revived each time that an elk, surprised at its bath, sprang from a muddy tarn and went bounding through the for-

est without taking the trouble to avoid the young saplings which it flattened under its weight. Venison was not tempting, for the season of flies emaciated the large game. So they shot none of these great animals, so difficult to surprise in winter when they are fat. But when they halted at night, Delorme would make haste to cut an oak branch and some hard, straight shoots for a bow and arrow. Thus he brought down without wasting powder the square-tailed hazel hens which came at sunset to roost in the big willows, showing not even the common prudence of timidity. The young men ate these winged roasts, happy to vary the somewhat monotonous fare of pemmican. Then three of them would sleep while the fourth watched. They were nearing the fording place of the Cree Indians, whose friendliness was sometimes a little uncertain.

They were glad when they had crossed the River of the Cypress and reached the rolling prairie, still broken here and there with clumps of aspen and maple, which the half-breeds called woodland islands. The great gray grouse and the Canadian prairie chickens flew up with a ka-ka-ka-ka-ka from under the horses' feet, coming to rest again two or three

hundred steps farther on. Rabbits would spring up with a start, and, once or twice, the men saw the white heart-shaped pinafore of a frightened antelope.

Now they began to advance more rapidly. The second evening after leaving the forest, when the Mouse and the Pipe Stone Rivers had been crossed successively, they found comparatively fresh traces of the passage of the carts of Lespérance.

And the next morning, when they heard carbines firing in the north, they knew they were following the right trail. They put spurs to their horses. This imprudence almost cost them dearly. They heard a rushing sound; then a stampede of buffaloes swept suddenly over a hill; the four scouts, to save themselves from the mangling hoofs of the herd, just had time to whirl their horses aside and spur off at a gallop. Each time one of the riders turned his head, he could see the countless throng of russet bulls, heads lowered, manes flying, gaining ground and appearing always on the point of overwhelming the fugitives. Following the herd, invisible in the thick dust raised by the hoofs, came the hunters, announced by the red flash of guns.

Jeremy was hard pressed in loading his gun with

powder, using tinder for wadding. Passing a stretch where the vegetation was more dry than green, he set fire to the prairie with a shot from his carbine. Galloping straight on, he stopped with his comrades in the middle of the first pond they found.

A heavy smoke lay to right and left, while the fire, running along the ground, was caught up into high flames by the wind and carried fifty feet over the prairie from where the blaze first started. Madened by the flames, the buffaloes separated and a column each swerved to right and left.

Three minutes later, themselves also spurred by the thrill of the hunt, the four boys were galloping over the prairie still burning and covered with black ashes.

Stopped on the right by a marsh and on the left by a stretch of prairie which had burned the previous autumn and where, consequently, there was only green grass incapable of feeding the fire, the inferno began to eat on a straight course. On either side, the hunt went on.

The half-breeds galloped pell-mell with the rear of the herd, each man choosing preferably a fat cow which he would fell point-blank. Then, as he rode,

he would pour powder down his gun barrel and, without packing it, spit down it a load of shot, a supply of which each carried in his mouth.

When the fatigue of the horses forced the men to suspend slaughter, Jeremy was able to find Lespérance.

The great half-breed with his long lean legs bestrode a pony too small for him. On either side, his feet seemed to drag in the green leather stirrups. Lespérance was filling his pipe, and before replying to Jeremy's 'Hail, uncle,' he waited until the pipe was lit, despite the wind. At last he made a friendly and protective gesture with his hand.

"I come from Louis Riel," said Jeremy. Lespérance took a puff and wagged his head. Jeremy continued:

"He sent me to tell you there was war again with the Sioux."

Lespérance contented himself, as before, with a nod of the head.

"You hear me?" said Jeremy.

"It's likely," said Lespérance.

"Then," continued Jeremy, "Riel says you must come back."

"Because?"

"The Sioux."

Lespérance laughed disdainfully:

"No need, son. I suspected all this contriving with the Sioux would come to nothing. The better you do them, the worse they do you. The more you kill, the more they will leave you in peace." He paused a moment, drew on his pipe and said:

"I know 'em. A bad lot. My wife is half Sioux—worst dam' slut in the colony." He smiled and fell silent again. In a moment, Jeremy said to him:

"But what does that decide?"

"That we haven't killed our bellyful of cows. When the meat's ready, we'll come back."

"And if the Sioux attack?"

"You take me for a boy. Wait till you see the camp I've got. Plenty powder, plenty bullets, plenty to drink and eat—enough to hold them off ten years. . . . And what's Riel doing?"

"Riel? Raising an army."

"Then Riel, if he's raising soldiers— No need for us to hurry back. He's no suckling, that cousin Riel. He knows sure where I am, since he sent you to fetch me. So you can bet he'll come away straight

from the south up here, for if the savages want to hunt me, Riel's going to take his chance with them. I can see what's coming, I'm prepared. But I'm not looking for trouble, for Riel is going to show them a few things. He's no boy, my cousin Riel."

"Just so, he said for you to come away."

"Is it for me or you to decide that? Me, isn't it? I understand. . . . I'll come when the meat's all prepared. That makes three or four days before I move."

"And if the Sioux attack?"

"You think I don't know what I'm doing? First, see, there's my cousin Hamlin who's hunting this way from the west with the boys along the Bourbeuse, and I'm going to warn him. You'll see if the Blackfeet don't fall on the Sioux. He's a regular devil for getting help from the Blackfeet, my cousin Hamlin. You'll see!"

No argument of Jeremy could shake the placid confidence of Lespérance in his cousins Riel and Hamlin. In fact, he did know them well, and his opinion of them was founded deep in his heart upon solid reasoning. Old prairie guide like Riel himself, he was less brilliant than his cousin and less

apt than he in governing a people, but he, too, was a good chieftain, and he knew that if Riel wanted to give a real lesson to the Sioux, there would be no two ways about it. It was foreordained that the blow would fall in two or three days at a place about a hundred miles south of where they were. Lespérance based this certitude upon his knowledge of the tactics of the Sioux and upon Riel's habits of attack.

Moreover, he had little to fear for his own camp. It was set up in a bend of the Pipe Stone River and fortified with a solid stockade. He was more uneasy about the condition of his cousin Hamlin, who, on his way to the Bourbeuse, risked running afoul of the Sioux cavalry. Riel doubtless would have divided the Indians, driving part of them south and part of them west, hoping that the Blackfeet would take care of the latter band.

Lespérance was so calm that scarcely had he reached camp when he sent the women into the field, whose usual duty it was to fill the carts with the animals slain by their husbands. Each hunter, before quitting the place of slaughter, would put his mark on the beasts he had killed. However, the half-

breed chief had the prudence to double the usual escort.

Lespérance himself took care of Jeremy's comfort. Others of the colony charged themselves with his three comrades. As Lespérance had told him, his camp could defy the attack of an army. The river rolling between rather steep banks was neither wide nor deep, despite the dams constructed by beavers the whole of its length. At the place chosen by the half-breeds, it wound through a capricious bend, forming the Greek letter *omega*, and thus surrounded a little half-island of about a hundred acres. On the three sides defended by the river, Lespérance had been content to throw up a sort of stockade, constructed of stout aspen poles cut from the adjoining banks, a device which, while lessening work, had the added merit of clearing the ground for shooting. The fourth side, which was very small, had been fortified with a much stronger palisade, behind which the carts, as soon as they came in, were drawn up as a barricade. Within this large enclosure the families had pitched their tents with the horses grazing among them.

Stretched on the grass, lazily smoking their pipes,

Lespérance and Jeremy talked of the recent happenings which the young man had related in detail. The old half-breed for the tenth time was asking the same questions of Riel's messenger, when the carts returned heavily laden. Lespérance turned his curiosity from public matters to what seemed to him of more immediate interest, a buffalo hump, the red meat traced with white fat. It was borne forward by Mother Lespérance and her daughter, to form the principal part of a meal.

Jeremy looked at the two women.

The mother was a true virago of authoritative demeanor. She affected disdain of three quarters of the other women, because her father was, as she told it, 'a pure white,' a true 'Français' of the Old Country. She drew from this 'blanc pur' father, an immense pride in caste. But she forgot to add, a thing moreover which everyone knew, that her mother was a savage of equally pure race, and even probably more pure than had been the late father, Brazeau. And so Mother Lespérance, like all the others, found herself with a good half of Redskin blood. And to tell the truth, one would have thought more, to look at her. Perhaps, as old

Dumas used to say, more than one had had a hand in her beginnings. And one of the few women who dared stand up against this shrew had spit this into her face in a stormy dispute one day.

“Ah! You may well believe yourself the spawn of a Français. I lay a wager that, if you took a look at a certain part of yourself, you know the spot, you would see whether the good God has given you more hair than the rest of us.”

This allusion to a certain ethnic peculiarity was the occasion of a notable battle, in the course of which the two antagonists, biting and scratching, rolled on the ground until Laurence and Lespérance, allied in vengeance and each secretly blessing the wife of the other for such an occasion, lifted a cask of water and recklessly drenched the two combatants, which parted the wenches no more than if they had been bulldogs.

But the virago, stooping to revive her fire, disclosed to the ravished eyes of Jeremy the tall and elegantly slender silhouette of a young girl. A black velvety glance came from between heavy rich lashes. A little abashed to be thus inspected by the stare of a fine-looking grown boy, she turned and showed

him the loveliest profile a young half-breed could want to dream of at night. The Indian type sometimes comes strangely close to that of the Japanese as Outamaru shows them to us. Nor does it take a judge of rare prints to appreciate his handling of the delicate line of a forehead, a well sloped nose, and the seduction of a glance.

Jeremy sprang to his feet, Lespérance regarding him with astonishment.

“And that’s—(he tried to remember her name)—that’s Flora?”

“To be sure it’s Flora. What’s the matter with you—jumping up in such a hurry? Are you sitting on an ant-hill?”

Embarrassed, Jeremy sat down again. Politely—following a manner not habitually respected by white adventurers—he sat down again and seemed to pay not the slightest attention to the presence of the two women.

But after the common meal, when Jeremy had renewed acquaintance with Flora, he sought an excuse to be nearer her. Was this really the thin little girl with grasshopper legs who used to play with the boys, not more than four or five years ago? He

was glad that the need of recognizing the hospitality they had shown him made it his duty to offer his help in preparing the meat.

As fast as Lespérance cut the scarcely cold flesh of the buffaloes into fine strips, Jeremy helped Flora lay it out on a sort of screen, where it would dry in the sun until it took on the consistency of aged leather. The smoke of willow bark kept flies from it. Jeremy knew it would take at least two days before this meat, well dried, would be ready to be ground between two stones, mixed with melted fat and sewed into the skin of the animal it had come from.

He dreamed of putting these two days to good use. That was a more difficult thing than might be supposed, for life on a hunt is austere. Jeremy knew enough about feminine weakness to know that love comes easier at dances, when heart is against heart and moist hands transfer the tremblings of desire—easier than in the solitude of the prairies.

During the whole afternoon, they did not exchange ten words. But at night, when the four of them, the father and mother, Flora, and himself, formed a circle about the fire and the old half-breed

began to remember illusory tales of the good far-away time, Jeremy began to throw gently on the lap of the young girl twigs, grass, grains of sand. She smiled and began to return them in kind.

Suddenly, old Mother Lespérance brusquely interrupted her husband in the midst of a piece of his most unbelievable bragging and said severely:

“Flora, come away!”

And without waiting for obedience, she seized her daughter by the hand and dragged her brutally toward the tent. Jeremy heard the old woman discoursing shrilly in the Sioux tongue on brazen-faced girls who let themselves throw matches—an allusion more than transparent—with the first rogue that comes along. The harpy began to predict the last depths of calamity until Lespérance, annoyed, took off his moccasins and hurled them through the open doorway at her head. Then he went in himself and lay down beside his spouse, soothing her with conjugal words:

“Peace now—you’re plaguing us.”

Then Jeremy rolled himself in his blanket and fell asleep, visions of Flora passing in his dreams.



III

FOR the fourth time, the half-breeds started again on their road to Red River. In the course of the three preceding days, Jeremy had found no occasion to say the slightest word to Flora. Old Mother Lespérance watched her like a snarling she-wolf, showing the lovers her few loose, blackened teeth, which, although scarcely able to gnaw flesh to the bone, could at least pass for venomous. Indeed, between words addressed to those who did not please her, she had a way of hissing shssh! shssh!—which reminded Jeremy of a rattlesnake. Among the half-breeds, and a certain number of old squaws, this comparison went further than the thought. All the squaws, more or less, had complaints against Mother Lespérance, and they joyously repeated the name of Missigenhehepic (the great serpent) which Jeremy had just invented.

The precautions of the old harpy were, however, more favorable to Jeremy's passion than a young man ignorant of feminine psychology might imagine. The very care Mother Lespérance spent in guarding Flora from Jeremy gave him a considerable importance in the girl's eyes. And there were crones who, liking Jeremy better than the vicious old woman, profited when a second offered itself to cast exciting allusions at Flora. Each one of these darts reached the heart. At least so it seemed, to judge by the sudden blush that would rapidly cover the girl's face, and by the paleness that would follow, giving an ashen look to her naturally pale tint. . . . But these are things which the love-stricken do not notice.

It was not until midway of the journey, when they were deeply involved in the sylvan marshes, that they found an occasion to speak alone one night in the starlight.

Jeremy had discovered a sand-bar near the camp. Digging a well some four feet deep, he tapped a vein of water slightly yellowed with iron solution, which happily would replace the stagnant water of the marshes. He had gone at once to tell Lespérance,

and the old man sent his daughter to the well under Jeremy's escort.

It is to be presumed that Mother Lespérance was occupied with some peculiarly exacting task at the moment.

Jeremy, having drawn some water for Flora, placed the bucket on the ground and glanced about him. Assured of the solitude, he said:

"Flora! Shakihitine, kia maca? (I love thee, Flora—and thou?)"

For a moment she was silent. Then lowering her head, she said softly:

"Nia maca (and I thee), Jeremy."

She did not withdraw when he circled her in his arms, saying:

"Outchiemine kishpine shakine (Kiss me, if you love me)."

She replied:

"Nipeuchine! (I am ashamed!)"

In spite of which she kissed him in return.

The delight of being alone, the delight of each other, mouth to mouth, did not last long. The voice of Lespérance, calm and placid, rose behind them.

"Flora, my sweet wench, you'd do better to go

help your mother. And it's well that I came and not her. With her bitch's temper, she'd be growling for a week."

Flora picked up her water and withdrew, obediently.

Lespérance said to Jeremy:

"No wrong in your caressing my girl, boy. Only I'll have no dam' bastards in the family. If you two want to wed—we can talk about it. If it's otherwise, you can pack yourself off, hear?"

"But, uncle, I didn't harm Flora—I kissed her."

"I guessed as much."

"And I want to marry her, just as soon as we reach home."

"We'll see. I don't want to have to feed you. Can you take care of your wife, if you marry her?"

"I have a mare—you saw her."

"Ah! A beauty. A real picture. . . . And then?"

"And then, Louis Riel, he's promised me a two-year-old bull."

"We are not rich, son, yet I'll give you another bull—but that is all. To marry Flora, you'll need to settle yourself on a piece of ground. And with ground, you'll need a house—no great affair, for

we'll have a log rolling for you. Then you'll want two good horses, or a team of oxen to plow. . . . I'll lend you plowshares for the first year. But the team of horses or oxen—you'll have to buy those."

"I've nothing to buy with."

"That's it, lad, as I said. Would you have me toil to cherish my girl, once she's married?"

"No, but—"

"No 'but' about it. . . . But if there is one, lad, it's whether you can wait, you and Flora. You can always bind yourself for a trip with the Company. You'll easily earn boon enough to buy yourself oxen, and then you can take a wife. Only if you bind yourself now, it's for a year. The autumn trek by barge, by winter in sleigh, going and returning, and then home by barge—then the wedding. Would you that, lad?"

"I know not what else."

"This will need talking with the old one. If she doesn't take to the notion, it's not going to be smooth. But it makes no difference. You two have already drawn together. . . . Come with me, son-in-law."

The future son followed his future father obe-

diently. Mother Lespérance had prepared muskeg tea and cooked thick heavy pancakes between two sheets of iron. Butter failing, she had spread the cakes with grease. And when the four had seated themselves in the shadow of a gnarled elm, the old half-breed told the news to his wife. Flora, joyfully surprised—she expected to be beaten—uttered a sound that carried its unmistakable meaning. But the old woman shut her up: shssh! shssh! Immediately she began to growl, saying:

“That’s the way with some men, shssh! shssh! give their girls to the first vagabond in sight. . . . Shssh! shssh! There are girls, shssh! shssh! who ought to have some shame—throwing themselves at the head of every rascal . . . shssh! shssh! But I suppose, shssh! shssh! such hussies take after their fathers. . . .”

“Peace! You’re plaguing us,” interrupted Lespérance, with this leitmotif which he consecrated to the grumbling of his wife. “Pay no attention,” he said to Jeremy. “She’s always the same. Ah! I don’t wish you one like her! No! Fortunately my girl—she resembles me—”

“Well, indeed, *mon vieux*, shssh! shssh! so you

wish to disgust him with Flora, shssh! shssh! True, she does indeed take after you . . . shssh! shssh! . . . But I hope she'll be less irksome . . . shssh!"

"Peace, I tell you! Peace, or I'll make you eat your spume."

And adding a gesture to his threat, the half-breed stretched toward his woman a gnarled fist, calloused and armed as with dark brown scales.

The vampire grew silent, but took it up again almost at once.

"Shssh! shssh! . . . Ah! Curse on me! . . . shssh! I should have indeed done well to listen to my dead father. Shssh! shssh! . . . He knew well enough I was mad when I married you."

"Leave your dead father in peace. If he's in Paradise and hears you, he'll think it's the devil."

"Devil—I! Shssh! shssh! . . . Indeed do you dare!—"

"And take a thought, woman, whether it's pleasant to hear you grumble thus day in and day out. This is the son-in-law I have chosen. And, moreover, he pleases the girl! And you are going to shut up . . . and it's the last time I am going to say it tonight."

Mother Lespérance scoured in rage the utensils of hammered iron which formed her kitchen equipment. Then she retired into her tent and went to bed. Lespérance and Jeremy, smoking their pipes, had exchanged a few words when Flora, steadfast in the silent approbation of her father, came unexpectedly and took the place the Red River custom allowed immemorially to betrothed girls. She sat down on Jeremy's knee, put her hand in his, and laid her head confidently on his hard-muscled shoulder. After which neither of the three spoke any word. Lespérance smoked, indifferent. One son-in-law was as good as another, and the girl is always the one most interested. Just so there are no bastards, parents need not mind. Flora, suddenly serious, was thinking how precious marriage must be, since the girl gave up all her liberty for the gain of one man. How was it Jeremy caused in her that delectable shuddering that transported her, trembling, shamed, happy and fearful of his caress. She tried to recall, even to the timbre of his voice, how it was when he had said: "Outchiemine kishpine shakine (kiss me, if you love me)."

The music of the Indian words sang sweetly in

her ears, music that lulled her until nothing more of herself was left, all of her being engulfed and drowned in a spring of emotion where the word: "Shakihitine (I love you)" fell drop by drop, with the crystalline sound of a fountain. . . .

A robust and simple instinct from his paternal line ruled over the dreams of Jeremy. He knew the physical and precise meaning of the word love. He was vaguely troubled by it. Often he had felt a like trouble near women who left in his life only a passing memory. What he was seeing now were babies with besmeared faces hanging to the skirts of Flora—babies who, letting go their mother's support, would fall back onto the floor, on their fat chubby bottoms, bewildered expressions on their faces. Then they would climb onto their father's knee to be juggled: Tikitinamou, tikitinamou!

The moon rose and soon from all quarters of the forest whippoorwills, wakened on their branches, opened their mouths and cried: *Bois pourri! bois pourrrrr-rr-i!*

It was the first night of the journey that they heard the chant of this bird of summer evenings, night wanderer that does not haunt the prairie, but

hides in the great forests, hunting mosquitoes in the solitudes. This told the half-breeds that they were drawing near home; and in the shadows somewhere, a jubilant man took a violin and began to play the Red River jig. Instantly there was an uproar, and the impassioned began to dance. Jeremy felt the haunches of his love trembling against his own. And at the moment when the two of them were being swept on like young wild things, forgetful of all but themselves, they were stopped by an imperious gesture from Lespérance. The voice of the old half-breed rose above the sound of the violin. The music fell silent, and the camp seemed suddenly asleep.

Separating for the night, Flora and Jeremy embraced one another. Before falling asleep, Lespérance was obliged to submit to another scene—shssh! shssh!—on the part of his wife who prophesied extravagant disasters for Flora. Lespérance, growing tired, cut short the unseemly torrent by letting Flora, well guarded, sleep under the shield of the harpy while he himself went without and joined his future son-in-law. They snored side by side until morning.

* * *

The next day was one of hard work. They had reached the deepest marshes of the forest. Over and over they were obliged to pull the horses out of the mire and to throw across the trail, on the unstable and treacherous surface of the bogs, rafts of tree trunks and faggots. Mosquitoes stuck to the sweat of their faces, and their torn shirts clung to the swift and flexing muscles of their bodies. Axes sounded with regular beat, the report vibrating heavier and heavier as the notch deepened. Then a sudden hush, followed by hoarse cries giving warning to stand aside to this or that direction. Then would sound one or two isolated blows of the axe—a cracking—after which came a crashing uproar from the noise of grinding branches and brush. A hum of polyglot conversation, in five or six tongues, gave a muffled accompaniment to this drama of swift death to the forest, and now and again a piercing oath rose through it all like an organ tone.

Tasks were varied and unforeseen, such as making faggots of green branches, hitching a tree trunk and a pony's tail together to haul the animal out of the bog, pushing knee-deep in mud to extricate a stubborn wagon, then pulling the horses by the bridle

and, ten feet farther on, stopping them to breathe, meanwhile sounding the bog and making mental calculation of the load such a surface of peat might support without catastrophe. But not even all of this could prevent Jeremy from time to time spurring his thin lank mare on to the front cart covered with skin stretched over half-hoops of willow. But only when they were crossing a clearing. And then it seemed that the trail always led immediately back into the forest. The bark of aspen trees, the elms, maples, ash, oaks, gleamed in the sunlight, making a jewel box of the underwood. Saskatoon and willows ran through all the shades of green. This play of light and shadow did not distract the young lover from the conversations which, no sooner interrupted, were taken up again, and this despite the silent and thick-lipped pouting of his future mother-in-law, vigilant guardian of her daughter's chastity. Already there was born between Jeremy and Mother Lespérance a hate which neither of them tried to conceal.

Flora, desperate, was obliged to calm with a mute prayer—ah! her eyes were too beautiful then for one to wish to sadden them—the peevish growls of Jeremy. Lespérance could rarely impose com-

plete silence on his wife. Worn out, he would turn the matter to pleasantries.

"Believe me or believe me not, my boy. When you are married, don't let your wife treat you as mine does me. Be rather like old Dumas."

"And what has he done?"

In reality, Jeremy knew the story of old Dumas by heart. The hero himself related it insatiably and with each telling invented new details. But it was necessary to please Lespérance, who was sometimes silent, but who also was sometimes afflicted with a mania for telling tales.

"And so, old Dumas, long ago, when he married la Domitille, the daughter of Charley Delorme who's dead, the night before the wedding I said to him: 'Look to it that your wife doesn't rule you, as her sisters rule their men!' 'Don't worry,' he said to me, just so. And so the next morning after the wedding, he was abed with la Domitille and he said to her, pointing over to his breeches: 'Are they yours, that booty there? There they are, my breeches, put them on.' 'Why no,' she says, 'they're not mine. Pass me my shift.' 'You don't want them, then—my breeches?' 'Of course not. Pass me my shift, as I ask

you.' 'Then, listen well, and never say I didn't give you the chance. I have offered you the breeches. You didn't want them. It's not my way to offer things twice. If ever you take it into your head to wear the breeches, I'll make you remember this, by a poker across your back.' And so, believe me or not," said Lespérance, "la Domitille never wore the breeches in that house."

Jeremy laughed aloud at this innocent joking. But mother Lespérance did not lose the opportunity to reply:

"Shssh! shssh! . . . Ah! the devil himself! shssh! . . . shssh! If you had a little care for your own children, shssh! shssh! But you're incapable of that. Shssh! shssh! If you weren't the devil, you wouldn't, shssh! . . . give his advice to this wheedler! . . . Shssh! shssh! . . . Your own children! Your own children! You know they're your own."

"But wife, I never doubted it—that they're my own children. Who is it would have wanted you? I was the only *métis* innocent enough."

"Ah! villainous good-for-nothing! Shssh! shssh! . . . Scurvy bully! Shssh! shssh! You're lucky I'm not a young thing. Shssh! Shssh! And that I'm not

willing to die with the sin—shssh! shssh!—of strum-pet on my head. Shssh! . . . You would see. Shssh! shssh! They weren't all so squeamish."

"The dirtiest pot can find a new cover." Lespérance joyfully hissed the proverb. It cost Flora a cuff, because she had the misfortune to laugh. Old Lespérance made as if to return the shrew her blow, and heaven knows what would have happened if at that moment a trace had not broken suddenly and stopped the cart with a violent jolt.

The trouble of mending the harness gave a happy diversion to the dispute.

* * *

Despite the ill-will manifested by Mother Lespérance, which had half spoiled the happiness of riding along beside his betrothed, Jeremy saw the end of the journey approach with regret.

Red River . . . for him, it would be a few weeks at most, seeing Flora an hour or two in the evenings. There would be the prospect, probably, of a long and painful circuit in the frozen solitudes of the North, through the snows and through the long nights of winter. Afterwards, it was true, would come the nuptials. But, in the meanwhile, no news

—eight or ten months without seeing her . . . without knowing.

* * *

In the stores of the Hudson Bay Company, Lespérance sold his buffalo hides—his own and others he had been able to procure here and there, in exchange for tobacco, salt or divers wares—and the surplus of pemmican. Jeremy and MacDouggs accompanied him; first, for the pleasure of talking at Fort Garry with trappers come from the four quarters of the horizon, who told tales of the most astonishing happenings (one out of ten had some foundation in truth); in the second place, they went along with Lespérance because Jeremy had decided to enlist in the service of the Company, following the advice of the old half-breed, and MacDouggs, half through curiosity, half for a reason, had come along because he, too, had promised to take service with Jeremy.

Lespérance piled up the flat buffalo skins until, well-pressed down, they reached the top of an incredibly long musket. This gun, worth five dollars, was to be the price of the skins, even though at that time buffalo hides were in demand in the

East as carriage robes. While this was going on, Jeremy and MacDougall encountered a windfall.

Smith, a land-surveyor, had just come in from Lower-Canada and was looking for solid and daring lads capable of assisting him. It was the third time in five years he had appeared, and the men he had lately recruited told that he paid generously, and to the last farthing. Smith intended to lay up at Fort Garry for at least a month. Then as soon as circumstances had dictated his route, he would start off. . . . Yes, these two lads pleased him. If they could assure him they would work conscientiously, he would take them with him. While examining them with his determined, inquisitive eyes, his hand thoughtfully stroked his barley-colored beard. The whiteness of this hand astonished the half-breeds.

* * *

Having concluded his business, even turning into money the cumbersome musket, Lespérance proposed that the two boys drink a round with him at Benard's. It was a place kept by a French-Canadian in the woods near Fort Garry, one of those clandestine huts which the English half-breeds called blind pigs—"cochons aveugles."

Benard—he had big fugitive eyes, like loto balls, in a puffed and florid face—kept only rye whiskey, which in Canadian, or rather *en canayen*, he called champagne. It was suspected that he himself made this whiskey with frozen wheat, refuse bought from the half-breeds. He malted it, then distilled it, and to the result added pepper to give it pungency. He would stretch forth his fat, hairy arm to fill the glasses, proud of that hair which asserted his white blood—pure white. Then, before the drinks were finished, he would demand their price. It was known, moreover, that Benard, when a client had money, was eager to drug him, so that he might strip him to his last sou, as soon as the man was dead drunk. Yet in spite of it, his infamous shop drew customers, because Benard was not too watchful of his wife, so long as one could pay well.

At nightfall, Lespérance and the two lads quite naturally found themselves drunk and without a copper. They revived at a few steps from the dive, which had been carefully closed by Benard after disembarassing himself of the three pieces of encumbering luggage. The companions could have sworn they had drunk not more than three small

glasses each. But this excellent made-over whiskey—it was only with belated remorse that Lespérance called it accursed poison—this estimable made-over whiskey had a droll way of capsizing the head.

More quickly sobered than the old one, the two lads each took a shoulder of Lespérance and began the task of leading him homeward. It was an arduous undertaking, for by night, especially on the outskirts of a whiskey dispensary, it seemed that all the roots which appeared well interred by day suddenly rose into the air with a vengeance.

Halfway home, they decided to allow the old half-breed to sleep a little. And so he slept, flat on his belly in the middle of the road, snoring between hiccups, while Jeremy and MacDouggs asked themselves why, on certain days, pipes refused with such energy to take a light.

“I would say that’s a festival,” said MacDouggs, sincerely admiring the deep intoxication of Lespérance.

“Ah! Ah! You’re right. I wonder what old Missigenhepetic is going to say about it.”

“She’ll say, shssh! shssh!—my damned good-for-nothing,” chuckled MacDouggs.

"She'll take the poker to him."

"Don't be afraid. The old boy's going to sober up. Once he's slept a half-hour and fallen two or three times into a pool of water, he'll be sober enough to give the old mother her match."

"Christ! The horses!" Jeremy swore suddenly.

It was only now they noticed they had forgotten the horses and the cart, tied in the woods not far from the darkened house of Benard.

Jeremy took it upon himself to go back and get them, while MacDougall watched over Lespérance. Nevertheless, Jeremy, by way of precaution, suggested it might be thoughtful to haul the intoxicated man out of the wagon tracks. This was accomplished.

Nothing more than the good will of a full moon was needed to enable Jeremy, now almost steady—the way back had had its good effects—to bring the horses out of their entanglement with the traces, collars, and the underbrush. Two horses, even when harnessed, restless under the attack of mosquitoes, can invent ways of tangling harness that test the patience of the calmest man.

Jeremy succeeded, however, in getting them started on the road without too much damage, and

he had to cling to the reins with both hands and saw on the bits like a demon to restrain them from a too dangerous gallop toward their stable.

Of course MacDouggs had fallen asleep at the side of Lespérance, and it took Jeremy some time to find them again, with the result that it was midnight when the three conviviais separated, having unharnessed the horses in front of Lespérance's door. In vain the old *métis* pressed the young men to accept his hospitality. But neither Jeremy nor MacDouggs were anxious to hear the first amenities of Mother Lespérance at sight of her drunken husband, penniless and without provisions.

For the moment, it seemed well to leave Lespérance to his final moments of quietude, before his wife discovered that he had squandered the money destined to buy flour, sugar and salt. It was also especially wise to guard one's self from being too directly involved in the developments which would follow this discovery.

Jeremy and MacDouggs, hidden behind a clump of willows, heard old Lespérance drum on his door. A rhythm of oaths accompanied the hammering of his fists.

The window on the upper floor opened and the voice of Mother Lespérance pierced the darkness:

"Ah! It's you, husband?"

"Yes, it's me."

"You're still gay, my *sacré torvieu!*"

Lespérance attempted a desperate lie.

"Not at all, *chérie*. I haven't drunk a cursed drop."

"Shssh! shssh! . . . Indeed! The like of it I never heard! Liar! . . . Shssh! shssh! . . . Not a drop, he says. . . . Shssh! shssh! . . . Drunk the whole keg. . . ."

"What's that? Come down and open to me or I'll break the door."

"Shssh! shssh! . . . Again! . . . Shssh! shssh! A dog's life. . . . Shssh! shssh! . . . Get a body up in the middle of the night—shssh! shssh!—to take care of a drunkard."

A light sprang up in the house, streamed through the windows and outlined the female demon standing in the open doorway.

"Get me some supper, hussy!" commanded Lespérance.

"A fine time—shssh! shssh!—to be getting sup-

per. . . . Shssh! shssh! . . . The middle of the night! . . . Shssh! shssh! . . . Flora! Flora!"

"What's the matter, mamma?" whined the voice of the girl, half-awake.

"Come down and help me. . . . Shssh! shssh! . . . Or rather . . . shssh! . . . don't come down. It's not right—shssh! shssh!—for a daughter to see her father in such a fix. Shssh! Shssh! Mark my words, he's been drinking with his future son-in-law. Shssh! shssh! . . . Model of son-in-laws. . . . Shssh! shssh! . . . Such a fine boy. . . . Shssh! shssh! . . . You see, Flora, what's prepared for you for not listening to your old mother."

Behind the willows, MacDougall chuckled in Jeremy's ear:

"Your future mother-in-law loves you, Jerry. Too bad Flora hasn't a sister. I'd like a mother-in-law like the old wench. A little wild, but I'd tame her—"

"Shut up. This is getting strange. Do saucerpans have wings?"

Bizarre shadows could be seen vaulting through the cabin. Old Lépérance, in defense of his son-in-law, was hurling the kitchen battery piece by piece at his wife's head.

A frightful howling went up.

Then, through the open door, the two boys could see Lespérance, master of the battle-field, throw his long arms across the table with his gray head rolling from one arm to the other; meanwhile the shrew made off from the cabin, shrilling imprecations in Cree. Having just exhausted the French and Sioux vocabularies, she was laying about her for new tongues to express her rage.

"Kitish miata! (kiss my —) Atim outish (behind of a dog). . . ."

"The gift of tongues, has your mother-in-law," whispered MacDougall to Jeremy. "You won't need to send your children to the school of your fathers."

But Jeremy wasn't listening, lost in contemplation of something new. While the voice of the harpy was fading in the distance, seeking refuge without doubt in the house of her sister, Flora, holding about her a dirty torn robe, descended the stairs barefoot. She kindled the fire, heated water for tea, brought some cold pork, hoeecake, and preserves from the cupboard and spread the table for her father. He sat watching her with a gentle expression that transfigured the besotted look his face had worn until she entered.

MacDougg nudged his friend's arm.

"Your fair one—(Flora was as dark as a crow)—she's all right. You could do without the mother-in-law, I won't try to hide it from you. But the little one—ah! a sweet little one. . . . Come away, it's getting chilly. We've got no blankets to keep off the dew. . . ."

As they drew away, MacDougg, a born minstrel, was already composing a song appropriate to the occasion, and Jeremy, catching the refrain, took it up in a voice somewhat husky:

CHANSON DE MACDOUGG

(*As the métis sing it even to-day along Red River*)

I

*Three of them left together
To have a nip of whiskey (bis)
They took one, they took two,
They took three. . . . Oh, the misery. . .
Ah!
Then, oh the mis— then oh the ry. . . .
Ah!
It's the mis—mis— It's the ry
Ah!
To nurse a bottle of whiskey.*

II

*After having well imbibed,
Pockets flat as a dish, (bis)
Get you out, you herd of swine,
For you're as sober as a fish!
Ah!
Then, oh the mis, etc. . . .*

III

*Once beyond the tavern door,
With a strut like a turkey cock, (bis)
For on one side they're on the ground,
And on the other they are not.
Ah!
Then, oh the mis, etc. . . .*

IV

*Me, I go back to the house,
In my pockets not a sound. (bis)
Get my supper, scurvy wench,
Or I'll turn your insides upside down.
Ah!
Then, oh the mis— then oh the ry. . . .
Ah!
Oh it's the wrang—wrang, it's the lin'!
Ah!
When a devil's in the cabin.*



IV

STILL but half recovered from their gayety of the night before, Jeremy and MacDoug, having after all spent the night in the open, learned of Riel's return with his little army. Now at Saint Vital, at Grande Pointe, the best mounted cavaliers, preceding by a half day the body of the troops, had arrived in a final gallop, with piercing cries of victory: Whou . . . hi . . . i . . . i!—shooting off their blank-loaded guns into the air.

The details of the combat were varied. All the braggarts, each coloring his individual share in the victory, were nearly of one accord in telling how, around Pelican Lake, the half-breeds had surprised an important band of Sioux, and how the latter were routed under a murderous fire. Whereupon, the half-breed cavalry had scattered in pursuit of the savages, and it was at this point that legend began.

Big Napoléon Maurin would relate, to any who would listen, how he had overtaken two savages galloping side by side. Scorning his firearms, he had snatched each of them from their saddles and knocked their heads together until their brains spouted.

Charley Paul had done still better; with a single blow of his hatchet, he had split a mounted savage in two and seen the two halves fall on either side of the horse, which had galloped on some hundred feet with the hatchet buried deep in its spine. . . . George MacNab boasted of having dispatched fourteen assailants with his knife. . . . Joe MacIvor would have killed the Wolf if— At that point, he would plunge into a complicated story, full of moving vicissitudes, each of which cost the life of at least one Sioux.

But high-pitched wails were filling the little cabin of Zephirin De'orme; his young wife had just learned of the death of her husband. Norquay, without in the least forewarning her, had brought her the news. Surrounded by relatives and friends, he was bringing down on Riel's head the responsibility for this misfortune. Suddenly the women abandoned

the orator, for all at once the clamorous plaint of the widow took on a sound that had a new meaning for the practiced ears of the matrons. Within a few minutes, all the busybodies, the croak of each one vying with the next, were spreading the news through the colony that Mary-Rose Delorme, seven months pregnant, had been brought to labor through shock.

In vain did Norquay, learning that the child had not survived, try to lay up against Riel this new misfortune. But his own ruse turned on him; the old women, shaking their pipes under his nose, accused him of being the cause of the disaster, for suddenly telling news that at any time was too soon to hear.

At last, Norquay, surrounded by his faithfuls—Jérôme, MacDermot and Pruden—took the road to Kildonan. Old Gideon Goulet laughed tauntingly as he watched him go away, his head hanging.

* * *

Convinced that the lamentations would not bring the dead Zephirin back to life, the half-breeds resolved to let joy have its way.

A committee of sports was named, MacDouggs being given the task of arranging the program.

Some generous person, who withheld his name—everyone immediately pointed to Antoine Ritchott, who blushed with pleasure—donated a great piece of white calico. On this, Father Martin, provisional head of the parish of Saint Vital, wrote the notice under the dictation of the young half-breed. MacDouggs did not know how to write, and the majority of the *métis* were not able to read.

But, as MacDouggs said, "A placard, boy!—that's something!"

"What shall I write?" Father Martin asked, amused.

"Put the heading first, Father. *Celebration in Honor of The Métis of Red River for Their Fight With The Sioux*. . . . Got that down, Father? Write it big so all can read."

"I have it," said the missionary, with a gently concealed mirth, meanwhile faithfully transcribing MacDouggs's words by means of a pen dipped in thick, powdery ink.

"Write big, Father. It looks finer. But make it so you'll have some room left—you understand. . . .

You through? Good. Now write this: *Nine O'clock, Solemn Mass!*"

"That," said Father Martin, his tall frame stooping over, "that is a good thought!"

"Yes—we must remember our Heavenly Father, so He'll remember us. . . . Through? Good—now this: *At one o'clock, sports: arrow shooting, bat-ball, cricket, lariat throwing, shooting match, horse racing, foot racing—*"

"Not so fast, son!"

"All right, I'll start over. *Horse racing. Foot racing.* . . . Got that, Father?"

"Yes."

"Good. Write: *Speeches by famous orators—*"

"But who will be the orators?"

"You and Monseigneur, and then Riel, and if you won't, then I'll make a speech myself. . . . There's still another one who'd like to speak—(MacDougall winked)—but it will be just as well if he doesn't have anything to say."

"You mean Norquay?"

"Sure. . . . Do you have any room left?"

"Yes."

"Good, now write this: *In the evening, dancing—*"

"Dancing? Ah, no! What would Monseigneur say?"

MacDougga scratched his nose.

"All right, don't put that down, Father. No need to—they'll know there'll be dancing without writing it down."

"As for that, I believe you. But it's a sin."

The curious expression of a plotting child came over MacDougga's face.

"We'll go to confession—"

"Yes," said the missionary. "But if you should die before you could confess!"

"What you're saying doesn't make good sense, Father. If we feel sick, we won't dance, and there you are. And if we feel good, we'll dance, and then we'll confess afterwards."

"Get along with you!" said the priest.

Not on any condition would he allow his anger to break out. But it was deplorable that his flock got from the religion he taught them only the principle of absolution which whitens all things and which to them seemed sufficient assurance against the fires of hell.

But later when MacDougga had passed the door

on which his precious announcement was fixed, the priest called to him:

"Bring me the placard."

"What are you going to do, Father?" MacDouggs asked defiantly. He held the field of calico to his heart, as if he were afraid the priest intended to destroy it.

"I'm going to write on it: *Dancing*."

"Yes? Really?"

And MacDouggs, filled with a boundless gratitude, rolled at the priest's feet, in a veritable spasm of religious ecstasy.

Father Martin wrote: *Dancing at evening*. Then taking leave of MacDouggs, he sprang on his horse and galloped straight for the bishop's house, where he informed the prelate that he had thought it better to give permission to dance than for all the colony to break a prohibition. The first anger of the bishop finally gave way before the facts, and Father Martin withdrew, satisfied with himself, and rather confident as to the results of his privy diplomacy.

* * *

Delorme carried off the prize for shooting with a bow. Following the rule of the game, the victor

won the gayly feathered arrows of the conquered. Blue jays, kingfishers, and the most strange variety of wild ducks gave their plumes to deck these beautiful shafts of *saskatoon* wood, well balanced and wrought with loving care. It needed skill, even for such a brave bowman as Pete, to successively place three arrows in a willow disc scarcely a foot in diameter, target which the stalwart arm of big Maurin rolled in a direction perpendicular to the line of shooting. A celebrated clumsiness caused Maurin to refrain from the contest, but prevented him in no wise from boasting. The distance to the mark was sixty steps, which Maurin measured off with a giant's step. The rough ground, moreover, caused the disc to roll in the most unforeseen fashion.

"A regular rabbit," Pete would cry. "You think anybody could hit that? Not much. . . ."

Which did not prevent him, however, from making a bull's-eye with each shot, the while letting it be known how hard it was to aim.

It was a Delorme, also, who took off the prize for shooting with a gun. But young Gabriel Dumont, a lad of twelve years (he had already killed his savage and boasted of it) narrowly missed taking the

honors from this Delorme, who was cited as the king of shots on all the prairie.

"Wait two more years," cried the little Dumont, beating the ground in anger. "Wait two more years, and see then if I'm a boy."

The other prizes were contested for by teams. The various parishes, Kildonan, Saint Vital, Grande Pointe, had all sent their best representatives. Blows were exchanged between Kildonan and Grande Pointe, because Grande Pointe triumphed so noisily. The gigantic Beaupré, officer of the day, was obliged to let several hotheads feel the weight of his lusty fist. In the opinion of those who understand such things, there is nothing like a good nosebleed for clearing the heads of men who are too sanguine.

Then came a speech by Riel, and after him Father Martin spoke. Monseigneur had excused himself, for all that he wished to say he had said that morning in his sermon. All the bronzed-faced men listened with open-mouthed admiration while Riel spoke impressively of their common ties. In his words, but slightly veiled, were reflected the thoughts of the bishop. The allusion to certain future projects was lost on the greater part of the half-breeds. Riel,

psychology failing him, succeeded only in giving away his plans to the enemy. Norquay and MacDermot glanced at each other significantly. No one noticed that, lost in the crowd, Smith, the Englishman, caressing his silken beard, bent on Riel, Norquay and MacDermot a strangely penetrating and thoughtful gaze.

When Riel had finished speaking and Father Martin had added his short homily to the half-breed's words, the chieftain of the Red River country was besieged by the whole crowd of courtiers. He had an amiable word for all, addressing each old man as 'uncle,' and calling all the women 'cousin.' Whereupon gossips babbled that indeed did Marie Lajimonnière-Riel have reason to weep.

Jeremy had not yet been able to speak with the chief. He was anxious to give an account of his mission, although the report was clearly a useless formality, since Riel knew already that the hunting party had returned without accident. The report, however, would be a means of calling back to Riel's mind the promise he had made of a young bull.

"I'm going to need it," he recalled shyly.

"To get drunk?"

"No—to set up housekeeping."

"That's more to my heart. . . . Who is she?"

"Flora Lespérance."

"Ah! little Flora—pretty wisp of a thing. She's a fair lassie. . . . And when is the wedding?"

"When I get back. I've hired out with Smith for a season."

"Smith! And what do you mean to do with your bull?"

"I'll leave it with my father-in-law."

"Um. He'll drink it up, the old boy. He's not a bad sort himself, but I think his wife must feed him salt—he's always thirsty. . . . Smith? Smith, you say? . . . I'll keep your bull for you while you're gone. It'll be branded with your mark. You trust me."

"Yes, Uncle."

"Smith? . . . I'm suspicious of that man."

"You think he's not good pay, Uncle?"

"No, no—it's not that. As for paying, he'll pay you. I have other suspicions."

Riel became abstracted. After a moment, he looked up and said:

"Don't put yourself out to mention to anyone

what I tell you. But when you get back, I want you to tell me everything you've seen—everything, you understand? I want you to watch Smith. It's a pity you don't know how to read. I'd like right well to know what this man wants—with his chains and his water-levels. And you'll be paid for it, understand? There'll be another bull if you report carefully all you see. . . . These dam' English swine! Dam' spawn o' bitches!"

"What have they done now, the bastards?"

"I'll tell you. I don't like men coming into the prairies with all sorts of contraptions I don't understand—measuring the land and calculating in their books how many acres all of it makes. And then they go back to Ottawa and tell it that the *métis* on Red River have a good country. . . . Something's wrong in all this business. I feel something crooked going on underneath."

"If that's what's going on, Uncle—a careless shot, just careful enough—while hunting—"

"No." Riel gazed affectionately at the boy, who through regard for him was so ready to become an assassin. "No. There's hospitality at Red River. This Smith—he's perhaps the worst bitch's whelp

of all of them, but he's among us. His life is sacred. Afterwards, they would say that the *métis* had no honor. Promise me that you won't kill him."

"I promise, Uncle. It's not my affair. But I don't understand. If this fellow is a rascal, why should one not kill him?"

"No, no—no bloodshed!"

To be sure, Riel had just killed more enemies in the last uprising of the Sioux than all his braggarts put together. He did not boast of it, but he thought without remorse of the blood thus spilled. Yet the thought of the violent death of a white man, even an enemy—and in Smith he divined the worst of enemies—troubled him. He did not leave Jeremy until the boy had repeated his promise to make no attempt on the life of Smith, and even to serve him faithfully.

There was dancing in many of the cabins that night. Sympathy, kinship, or love itself took the place of invitations.

Mother Lespérance, returned from her sister's, had forgotten all her ill humor with the feeling of gayety in the air. Her husband had taken it upon himself to spread the news that his house would be

open to the dancers. He had even engaged the younger Joe Gosselin and his violin, which assured a brilliant gathering. And then, upon leaving Gosselin's, he had gone to Fort Garry to buy flour and other provisions, even a little whiskey. But generous guests could be depended on to bring that. Avoiding the melancholy lair of the brigand, Benard, Lespérance arrived home bringing to the women what was needed for entertaining the guests.

Soon Flora and her mother had yoked themselves to the stove. Buns turned golden in the fat; juicy tarts, stuffed with blueberry preserves, browned between plaques of sheet-iron. Mother Lespérance, in a rare good humor, even allowed her daughter to cook a little tart to eat with her lover when he came to see her at the accustomed hour.

Then the two women brought out the white cotton cloth, reserved for high occasions. And while watching the cooking of the tarts, buns and cakes, they ironed and frilled shifts, skirts, and a cap for the mother.

* * *

Around nine o'clock, Gosselin attacked the jig, *Turkey In The Straw*. The women and the girls be-

stirred their hips, keeping time with their feet, in expectation of the dancers' approach.

Flora and Jeremy danced the first four reels together. They were remarked a great deal, for each of them danced bravely with the other. Lespérance profited by the occasion to announce the betrothal to any who would listen. The old men showed their approval by shaking hands with the father; the women, jealous of youth, regretful for the good times that had passed, reckoned in whispers how many years would have gone by before the pretty, svelt and fresh Flora had become, like themselves, thick, wrinkled and hideous.

Meanwhile, Jeremy, at the fifth dance, withdrew a moment to take a swallow from MacDouggs's jug. The jug had been carefully hidden in the woods and was guarded by a surly dog. MacDouggs produced it for none but his best friends.

And at the moment Jeremy disappeared, his place was taken by Charlie Leslie. It was at the instigation of Mother Lespérance that he had come up to ask Flora to dance. Some months previous, he had made the beginning of a flirtation with Flora, remarked without displeasure by the mother. The elder Leslie,

Charlie's father, was a Scotch half-breed from Kildonan and rumor had him a rich man. And now the sight of Charlie Leslie rekindled in the heart of the old woman all the hate she bore Jeremy. Therefore Charlie had gone to offer his arm to Flora, which she dared not refuse. And standing by her side, waiting for Gosselin's bow to begin, the two of them stared at by the whole assemblage, he let it be seen that in his left hand he was tenderly holding the right hand of Flora. She herself was trying in vain to be released from this rough embrace. She began to blush. And then a smile went over many of the faces in the room and someone cried aloud:

"Poor Jeremy! If she's starting already . . ."

Silence fell, for Jeremy had appeared in the room again, casting his eyes about for his betrothed.

When he saw her, it appeared for a moment that he would dance with Belle MacIvor, who more than once had aimed her allurements at him. Thus he would avenge boldly the affront offered by Flora, for affront he judged it to be, and he was not alone in the thought. And then for a moment, it seemed that he might take his girl by force. He looked from the one girl to the other. Belle was not homely, in the

half-breeds' conception of beauty. Her cheeks were somewhat too large and eyes somewhat too little, yet men looked on her person as beautiful, for her breasts were full. By this adornment she had come by the characteristic pet name—though somewhat inelegant—of Tit. And nothing less than the authority of Father Martin had been needed to make the people of Grande Pointe give up the habit of calling her by this name.

But by all odds, Flora was much the more desirable. Even at the moment Gosselin was attacking the first measure of *Cock of The North*, Charlie felt a powerful grip lay hold of his neck, and he was spun around under the force of an irresistible strength. Jeremy stood facing him.

Laughs spread, cries arose.

“Bravo, boy! Seize your goods, boy!”

There is only one insult a *métis* never pardons. And on the instant, Charlie, wild with anger, let these words escape:

“Son of a bitch!”

Son of a bitch—the oath is rendered in Cree by *atimactis*, or in French by *filz de chienne*. Jeremy spoke English poorly, but he was capable on occasion

of translating into five or six languages the greater part of Anglo-Saxon oaths and blasphemies.

Instantly he let go Flora's hand, called Mac-Dougg, intrusted the girl to him, and made a sign for Charlie to follow him outside. The violin stopped, and twenty spectators made as if to interfere.

"You're not going to fight here—not at Lespérance's house."

"He called me *enfant de chienne*."

"He's right," said an old man. "In my time you planted your fist straight between the eyes of a fellow who called you that."

Opinion differed on the proprieties to be observed. Lespérance himself, who could estimate a man's true worth, and was able to guess almost to the ounce a boxer's weight—not to mention a steer's or a horse's—was favorable to a fight. He judged that Jeremy weighed probably fifteen pounds more than Charlie and that he was likewise just as strong.

While the women put their heads together inside the house, blaming all the men in general, the masculine assemblage, torches in hand, formed a circle around Jeremy and Charlie.

The two combatants had removed their dappled

jackets and tied their bright sashes around their waists.

To impress Jeremy, Charlie was leaping and dancing in the ring, uttering fierce cries and beating his hands together defiantly. These tactics had more than once succeeded, and he had thus conquered champions much stronger than himself, disarming them with dread. Jeremy did not allow the confidence he had in his own strength to be shaken. At the fourth war cry uttered by Leslie, Jeremy charged. Leslie must have had the impression of meeting with a forest cyclone that bows the trees flat in its passage. An omnipresent Jeremy was upon him from all sides at once. Leslie gave way.

Then the charitable crowd pressed about the fighters. Jeremy was congratulated, but it might just as well have been Charlie, had he been the victor. The blood trickling over Leslie's face was staunched. His two eyes were so swollen he could not see. Then a glass of whiskey was poured for each of the adversaries and they were forced to shake hands. After which the dance continued as if nothing had occurred.

* * *

On the day following, Jeremy, returning from Fort Garry where he had gone on behalf of Riel, met up with Charlie Leslie.

The latter, wheedling and soft-speeched, approached his conqueror of the previous evening.

"Well, old man, you gave me a pretty nice trimming last night. But we're no worse friends for a little thing like that. Let's go have a drink at Benard's. I want to treat you."

Bait compounded of the worst drug, even were it known to be poison, such as the mixture Benard served his clients, never failed to draw a young fellow of Jeremy's make-up. He went to alcohol like a crayfish goes to spoiled meat—to be caught. And so without any hesitation, he turned his horse's head in the well-known direction of Benard's place. Leslie regulated his pony's gait to that of Jeremy's mare and began to tell him stories that would interest no one, he knew it himself. But it gave him the opportunity to break in from time to time with protestations of friendship and to manifest the most sincere repentance—at least in appearance.

Benard opened his door to them somewhat hesitantly. Aided by a new associate, Bonnaud, a great,

fat, squint-eyed man—a rather convenient trait when one doesn't care to look men in the face—Benard was busy teaching the beauties of *Pitro* to an uninitiated Ouelette, and to Chris, the youngest son of MacDermot. But the gruff face of Benard lit up, however, when Leslie, to begin with, ordered and paid for a bottle of *poil de la bête*, therein revealing his Scotch blood. Benard went back to his mysterious game of cards in the back room. They played sitting on chairs, using the bed for a table. Madame Benard, big and lusty, kept her eyes on the drinkers. She was large and massive, and capable, it was said, of coping with two ordinary men. There was not a rake in the settlement who had any doubt of it, for it was known that in certain combats—of a special order, it is true—Madame Benard had laid out in the same night indeed more than two men. Fine, fat cows, whose great udders were suckled by lusty calves, stood as the witness and the spoils of these combats.

Riel, with a thought for morality, had more than once asked authority of Monseigneur Provencher to take measures for forcing the undesirable household to quit Red River. But a noise other than that of

Norquay, always jealous of recruiting the natural enemies of the honest Riel, deafened the bishop's ears to the calumny: the tithes of Benard and his wife made a generous tinkle in the clergy's plate, and every Sunday they communed together for the edification of the parish.

While the young men were drinking, Madame Benard's crafty chatter distracted their attention from Benard and Bonnaud who, beyond the partition of ill-jointed planks warped by the heat, were engaged in making the day a profitable one. The infallible means they had found was to get the two victims to drink enough to muddle their heads; then arousing the stupid parish patriotism, they would propose a game of cards, *canayens* against *métis*; thereupon they would add craftiness to luck. In a game where the cards are quite dirty and the figures none too plain, it is not too difficult to turn a bad play into an ambiguous play. Drunk fellows pay attention none too well, and in that case if one of the victims feels strong enough to parry the first bad play that arouses anger, one has all the advantages of the game, not to mention the count. Thus the money of the half-breeds changes pockets, and

after the money, there is always the exodus of a few fat animals, bought cheaply. And what does price amount to, moreover, in such a case! When one knows how to write as Benard and Bonnaud did—praise be to their fathers!—one draws up papers quite in order, even when the second witness to the private deed affixes no more than a cross mark in witness to the cross mark of his friend.

But therein were profundities which neither Jeremy nor Charlie tried to penetrate.

Jeremy, while drinking, was dreaming of a tall, dark girl with strangely soft eyes. A delectable mist veiled the apparition, growing more and more delicate as glass succeeded glass. Charlie Leslie, contrary to his habit, drank little—just enough to lift him to the desired pitch.

At last the bottle was emptied. Leslie got up and led Jeremy outside, just as they were beginning to hear young MacDermot from the other side of the partition blaspheming his ill-fortune, Madame Benard chastely stopping her ears lest they hear certain unseemly words.

The solitude of a deep thicket, and the noise made by two restless ponies fighting flies with their tails,

or scratching their sides against the young trees, covers up many things. . . .

Leslie had reason to suppose that no one had heard the groan uttered by Jeremy, nor the sound a heavy body makes as it strikes the ground; and he was proposing to follow it up with a blow under the ear—the same that had been landed by Flora's lover—the while cautiously preparing to loosen his mare's tether. What logically followed next in Leslie's mind was a dance with both feet on Jeremy's face and chest, by way of copious revenge for the thrashing of the night before.

But as chance would have it, MacDoug, taken with a thirst, got it into his head at that very moment to delve into the same thicket to tie his horse, a little piebald pony circumstance had led him to borrow from his uncle.

And caught between MacDoug, whose stomach was empty, and Jeremy, suddenly sobered by the blow, it was Charlie Leslie who came out with a drubbing.



V

THE days waned.

Wave on wave of blue and green, the prairie paled. Grasshoppers with dragon bodies and heads like horses hopped in the mown fens. Hay lay in high, long stacks, crowned with sloping roofs of marsh-reeds. The little gardens were ripening their maize, the early Indian corn of the squaws. Scarcely touched by the light frosts of August, the tassels yielded their golden grain. The mosquitoes became less vicious. Young wild-ducks, which until now had run timidly about their mothers from the covert of the osier-beds to the ponds—dangerous undertaking wherein it was best not to follow the mother duck—suddenly felt their wings capable of propelling them in a straight line, level with the water, which they ruffled with their feet. Then at evening, the whole flight of them took to describing

perfect circles, in imitation of their fathers. . . . The foliage of the maples bloomed with a red stain; the ash trees went golden, and the oaks passed from a bronzed green to an oxidized copper. After days of wind, the birches that gave their bark for canoes gleamed with silver trunks amid branches painted with a carmine lacquer.

One morning, Smith announced to MacDougall and Jeremy that the preparations were ended and that they would start the next day.

Flora grieved in tears the whole of the afternoon, her arms locked around Jeremy's neck. For an instant she would calm the sobs that shook her firm, round breasts with rhythmic spasms, and she would turn upon her lover the eyes of a wounded doe and her lips would press silently the lips of the man.

Old Lespérance, his sash loose about his loins—for he was developing a paunch—would stop in the midst of carving a pipe from a dry ear of maize and give his daughter the encouragement of a kindly but vain sympathetic word. The old mother would laugh silently, joy in her heart, so much did her blood of an old Sioux wax warm at the sight of the torture the girl was enduring.

The presence of the boy did not inconvenience her in expressing herself. She spoke to old Lespérance:

"Ah, well, my man! It's you who have fixed it. You betroth them, and here he is going out to the prairie with this old Smith." (Old Smith could have been no more than thirty-five at the most.) "To be sure he will perish. You've seen the last of them all. They'll find their end in a snowdrift this winter, or still better they'll fall through the ice on the lakes, or yet they'll be overtaken by—who knows what? . . . Ah! these men—they've got no sense! And then what? Little Flora here having to wait half a year to get married. And to who? You'll come back never, Jeremy. You're leaving for the grave."

"Well, let him stay here then . . . and get married," said the old one, out of patience.

"And think you one marries off a daughter in such fashion . . . to a lubber who has not a crust to his name? Aye! let him have his pleasure with her, and then see who it will be who feeds Flora and the papooses."

"But I'm not going to die, Auntie," Jeremy would say.

"What do you know about it?"

"Others before me have gone where I am going—"

"You have plenty of time to put such notions into Flora's head. Wait till the thing's done."

"Yes—you're one without a heart," grumbled Lespérance. "Don't listen to your mother, Flora."

"What? Would you have her die young? Know you not the commandment—

*Let Honor be to thy father and mother,
That thy days may be long in—*

Heathen! get away with you! Ah! I'm one that knows when a wench has a lover on the brain, nothing can make her hear reason. If she had listened to me, she'd have been Madame Charlie Leslie, with cows, and goods, and a fine house—and means to get her rightly big, and fat as well. Ah! Jeremy, thou ill-fated!—look to it, if thou return, to get her not thin. You shall see what it costs . . . you shall see. Behold her now, in fine flesh!—half fat, half meat. A rich sight, is she not? If you keep her not in that condition, you shall see . . . you shall see. . . ."

* * *

Smith's two barges made their way up the Assiniboine.

MacDougall and Jeremy kept up a constant movement with poles, while Smith and Father Martin guided with paddles. The missionary was on his way to evangelize the northern Cree and had profited by Smith's offer to accompany him as far as Fort Corne.

At about eighty miles to the west of Fort Garry, at Portage-la-Prairie, the voyagers left the winding river and its flat banks, bordered with elms and maples, to make for the waters of Lake Manitoba. It was a long portage of ten miles, over the narrow trail that wound through the underwood and through the mud of the marshes, to the trickling lagoon which in a somnolent and scarcely civilized fashion drained the waters of the forest for the profit of the lake. Thanks to the good will of the Company's captain at the post, Smith was able to procure the aid of a few suspicious savages, without whom the portage would have lasted many days. But the captain of the fort at Portage could refuse nothing to the blond man with such firm blue eyes, with such gentle manners, who drew from his bosom letters at the bottom of which flourished the signatures of men whose names alone were sufficient to bend the will of an employee thoughtful of his future.

Innumerable ducks, each taking warning from the other, sailed away over the marshes at the passage of the barges. The moor-hens, however, were content to dive, appearing again sixty feet farther on, head turned sidewise, gliding over the water which trailed after them in a V, the down strokes of their webbed feet slowly diminishing.

That night, the third of the voyage, they made camp on the shore of the lake, on a little narrow strand littered with the bodies of great fish surprised in the shallows by a sudden squall and cast ashore by a relentless ground-swell.

Under the light of the moon, the lake appeared like a concave disc of polished silver, embossed with little shadowed ripples, enshrined on the east with La Pointe-aux-Chênes and on the west with the rugged headland that fixes the limit of Bay-aux-Sables.

The next day, following the western shore through fear that sudden traitorous winds would rouse the sleeping lake to a raging sea, the boats put out into the north.

It was the first trip Jeremy and MacDougall had made in this direction. But Smith, and especially

Father Martin, knew the country in the most astonishing fashion. Each of them endowed with an infallible memory, they would repeat without error the names of the most remarkable places: Isles-aux-Canards, the Narrows, La Pointe Richard, La Pointe du Liard, Moor-Hen River.

They made their way into this latter to gain the waters of lake Winnipegosis, at the portage of Fort de la Poule-d'eau. Geese and flights of cranes calling stridently passed over their heads, like solved problems, Smith would say, admiring their geometrical precision. The northern wind blew across their faces a fine mist of icy water, uncomfortably sharp, through which it was necessary to steer with the head tucked down as low as possible. They were brought to a halt among the Birch Isles while a great wind of three days churned to wild froth the angry crests of the jagged waves, the color of chocolate.

Great violet-colored clouds running swiftly on the horizon, dragging their billows low, did not allow the rough watery plain to grow calm. They knew this preceded the foreboded snow. But well sheltered by thick willows, the travelers warmed themselves at fires perfumed with the fragrant birches, while Mac-

Dougg, chef of the expedition, would put geese to roasting.

Meanwhile Smith and Father Martin kept up animated conversations, sometimes in English, sometimes in French, and sometimes in one of the numerous savage dialects each of them knew perfectly.

The energy both men recognized in the other was a great bond between them. Smith admired this man of burning faith who endured the last miseries to make converts of the most narrow-minded savages. An apostle in the guise of a martyr, for the sum of the innumerable daily privations was endured with the purest heroism. In return, Father Martin had a deep suspicion that the surveying projects of Smith had a goal quite other than that of science—a goal that he, a Catholic missionary, would not have been annoyed to discover. It was evident that patriotism was the fountain that animated this frail form and gave it the will to surmount the fatigue of each day. But Smith guarded his secret, the while manifesting for the priest that sincere affection born between two civilized men lost together in the wild—unless, of course, the two men do not come to hate each other.

They also enjoyed teasing each other. Smith had

enough Scotch blood to like a joke. Father Martin was at heart Gallic.

When the missionary had cut up the goose presented him on a piece of birch bark by MacDoug, Smith, pointing to the rump of the fowl, did not lose the occasion to remark:

"That's the bishop's hat, isn't it?"

Father Martin retorted immediately:

"We call it the heart of the queen."

This allusion to the young and beautiful Victoria, all of whose male subjects were more or less in love with her, would in any other circumstance have aroused the anger of an Englishman profoundly English, for whom nothing was so beautiful as his country, so noble as his queen. Smith's gay laughter revealed more plainly than words how greatly he loved the missionary.

The long passage through the Lake of Cedars and the Saskatchewan River seemed short to the two men. At Fort Corne, they separated, Father Martin going in the direction of Lake Rouge and l'Ile à la Crosse, where he was to relieve Father Lafèche, destined to enjoy a long rest from his apostolic labors. Smith set forth to explore the great primeval stretches

lying between the Northern Saskatchewan and the Southern, the region of Wild Duck Lake. The Englishman did not wish to wander too far from Fort Corne. When snow fell, which would not be far off now, he intended to return to the post to get dogs and sleds which would permit him his long-loved dream of penetrating the country lying between the fork of the two Saskatchewan and Plume Lake.

It was—and it still is in part, despite civilization and the railroad—a region of low prairies and marshes studded with little gray willows, dwarfed and thick, waxing strong in the moss; of marshes surrounded with tall reeds like distaffs, the oozy bottoms carpeted with the most loathsome growths, such as fleabane that causes eczema.

Even the savages, the peaceful Cree of the big prairie, seldom came into these solitudes, and at night, while the campfire guttered in front of the door of the silk tent, no human life intruded upon the mysterious life of the night. Jeremy and MacDougall would talk together about Red River, bringing the happy dances back to memory, and the sounds, and that thing which they called by the general term 'le plaisir,' MacDougall never failing to

make thoughtless allusion to Flora which would bring Jeremy's heart to his lips.

When he had written a few mysterious lines in a worn notebook and sometimes put strangely precise questions to Jeremy and MacDougall, Smith would lie on a bed of sweet fir branches or stretch out on a blanket of dead grass cut from beneath the snow, smoking his mixture of tobacco and kénik kénik, harvested from the under-bark of the red dogwood.

Jeremy and MacDougall would say to each other:

"Without doubt, he's a smart man."

"It's because he's got a head."

"And he's not proud, considering he's an Englishman."

"What has he come out here to find?"

"My cousin Riel thinks there's something on his mind."

"But Monseigneur doesn't think so. He says this man is learned."

"It may be gold he's hunting."

"If he finds any, we'll have our share."

"I'd get a span of fine horses, and I'd send to the States for a carriage, a fair one—something beyond compare."

"To take Flora riding?"

"Yes. I'd dress her out in some fine white silk stuff, with plenty of lace. . . . I saw an English lady like that in the South."

"Me, I'd take a trip to Chicago and to Sault-Sainte-Marie."

"I hope we find gold."

Smith, whom they questioned in a confidential moment, told them gravely that this whole country was a gold mine and that the day would come when every square mile of this solitude would make a fortune for some family. At the moment, the thing appeared so improbable to the two young men that they decided the Englishman was mad, that he would never find the metal he was hunting for.

During this short season of Saint-Martin, called Indian Summer in the low country, the only pleasant time of the year and the only warm season that does not bring the fierce venomous humming of mosquitoes, Smith and his two companions encamped on the river bank close by the anchored barges. With their provisions hidden in a cache, they explored the wild desolation of the country.

Now and then, bringing out the surveyor's chain,

the Englishman would have them measure surfaces. Sometimes they had to cut a perfectly straight path through the gradually thinning forest. In the violet glooms, shadowed with the rough brown trunks of the trees, gleamed the sorrel berries of the alders, dry and withered, yet clinging tenaciously to their silvery stems which waved gracefully among the stripped blue shoots of the saskatoon. The white blazes left by the ax on the peeled trunks of the trees marked the alignment of the trail. Then the work would continue to the middle of the marsh where all three of the men would flounder to their bellies in the water, their feet sunk in mud, as if it all were the most natural thing in the world. They would joke about the petty miseries while warming themselves before a fire of dead branches piled hastily in a clearing. Smith, meanwhile, would be making swift calculations in his notebook and taking observations with the sextant. This bizarre instrument inspired a profound respect in the two half-breeds.

The spectacle of nature, daily though it was, never wearied them.

It began with dawn, while the fire was gradually

paling under the tea warmer, hung simply on a willow branch growing there as if for the purpose. A silver vapor hanging over the lowlands would rise gently into the sky, as if an invisible breath had blown upon it, and, suspended an instant in the branches of the trees, it would begin to fall in a fine iridescent mist. A pale, clear sky would unfold, dotted with migratory wild fowl that screamed, croaked, cawed, and sang wildly at exploring the new landscapes, far from the arctic steppes where they had been born. And these sky wanderers would stop suddenly, mysteriously guided in their choice, over this or that lake, this or that clearing. Innumerable starlings blackened the foliage at the wood's edge, yet so lively they were and so sonorous that the scene was not mournful. Twenty varieties of ducks swam in circles on the same pond, surprised to discover they all belonged to the same family. Tall cranes, one foot drawn up, disdainfully thrust forward their long necks. Gossiping geese held useless cabals. Crows called to one another intimately and without rest to find out where the last carrion had been abandoned by the wolves. The big prairie chickens nesting in these places—willow grouse with

squarer tails than the southern grouse—were frightened by all these neighbors; families of them, with ruffled backs, picked at the ripened berries scattered through the osier-beds. Then suddenly, beating the air with great rhythmic wings, the *kiliou*, the bald-headed eagle, would surge over the horizon, volplaning in circles that narrowed and narrowed and grew ever lower. The starlings hushed and grew still, immobile as lumps of coal. Why had they stuck to the trees untouched by the fire of earlier years? The ducks slid silently and swiftly into the rushes, turning their heads uneasily; the cranes lost their haughty assurance; the geese, hushed for an instant, reproached themselves inwardly for their cumbersome and tempting fatness; the crows, sure of the disdain of the king of the skies, looked on indifferently to see what victim would fall to the winged catastrophe; the grouse consoled themselves with their past and future misfortunes, hoping that, among so many strangers, the king would make a judicious choice, reserving for harder times the permanent dwellers of the heath. Then suddenly, folding his wings, the hunter would plunge dizzily. . . . And the instant after, nothing seemed to have

changed on the prairie. Life went on again, heedless of that small spark of existence that had passed into the unknown. . . .

Sometimes they would surprise a roebuck at its watering hole, one of those springs so discreetly hidden among the trees along the river bank. He would stare an instant, astonished, and with a fantastic bound of his long delicate legs, spring away into the thicket, for the space of a lightning flash showing his white pinafore framed in a tawny piping.

In the dried clearings, gophers played on the edges of their holes, in the bottoms of which they had already stored their winter provisions, various grains and little red nuts.

A solitary elk, surprised in sharpening his antlers against a tree—it was the season for battle—stood firm on his long legs and turned upon the intruders his great, bizarre head, as if he were of a strength to look them in the face, his eyes planted on either side of his head. But his bluff could not last. Conscious of not having quelled this sudden affront, he would turn his head sidewise and with a single eye consider what manner of things were these strange bipeds who had not been overcome by his

lordly stature. Uneasy at last for the first time in his life, he would whirl, his flat antlers lying on his shoulders, and, nose in air, beard flying, flee this unknown danger amid a clumsy uproar of grinding brush and breaking limbs.

The little short-eared wood rabbits had already gotten their long white winter coats, but so imperfectly that they resembled balls of snow splashed with mud. The moment the newcomers were seen to be neither wolves, nor lynx, nor creatures ready to get down on four feet in pursuit, the little rabbits, after three wild bounds, would sit up on their hind feet and stare without understanding at the passage of the strangers.

The heath-hens paraded gravely through the underbrush, making far more noise in the dry twigs than was useful or prudent. They would stop suddenly, their heads hidden behind trees, as if playing hide-and-seek. It was nothing but a pretext, MacDougall said, for showing off a ridiculously unfeathered rump under a fan of gray lace.

But what interested them most was to watch the muskrats, those pretty diminutive beavers with long straight flat tails instead of the short wide flaps of

their big cousins. When the three explorers would come near a pond, it was a signal for a general plunge for all the little frightened animals. First the males would show the end of a nose above the water, reassuring themselves that the danger was not so immediate as they had feared, deciding that after all they had to do with nothing more than peaceful herbivorous animals of a new species, uglier and more strange than the elk himself. Without taking their eyes from the strangers, they would swim around and at last return to the houses they were building. They would climb upon the formless piles of mud, shake their long mahogany-colored coats, at once miraculously dry, and begin to work anew. The mother and babies would paddle around, holding in their teeth the cane roots mysteriously come by and, what was more mysterious, cut in exact lengths: it was this that struck Smith. The workmen would then deposit the materials at the feet of the master mason and architect. MacDouggs, the observer, swore by all that was eternal that it was always the father of the family who filled this rôle. Then the little animal would sit up busily on his short hind legs, leaning a second on his tail bent

back like an Irish fishhook, would reflect quickly, quickly but correctly choose the root needed, take it in his teeth, put it in place with his front feet, dive, bring up in his paws the right sort of mud filled with bits of roots to make the mortar stronger. He would close the cracks, using his tail for a trowel, then, already become somewhat sociable, he would turn on the curious a look of self-satisfaction. He was not wrong in being proud, for the three men, the one of them so unlike the other two, manifested a thoughtful and unending admiration. The half-breeds marveled because, however cold the winter, the water never froze. And they were thinking of those temperatures that drive the mercury into hiding in the little globes at the base of the thermometer where it lies sleeping, inert, frozen, useless, conquered and profoundly ridiculous. But in the interior of these lodges the muskrats drank and bathed in winter as in summer . . . and sometimes there could be seen, restless, fugitive, cruel, a beautiful dark martin with low incredibly long body, inflated stomach and thick long tail, spying for a second on the little amphibious creatures, calculating how many good meals he would be able to take on the ice

of the pond when the terrible cold of winter had driven the fish out of reach of his little merciless teeth.

These spectacles would prolong themselves until the wan sun, now small in diameter, modestly disappeared. It sank beneath a horizon already conquered by the long night of velvet glooms bordered with stars, sometimes swept by luminous fringes and rifts, quivering and downy lights borrowed from the aurora borealis which set fire to the icebergs fifteen hundred miles farther north between Bathurst Point and Victoria Isle. Then the great snowy owls, weeping by day, and the timid little screech-owls would begin a restless and stupid hou!—hou!—mocking everything, including themselves. Wolves gathered and howled, telling of trails where a roebuck could be brought down. Sometimes there could be heard the plaintive wail of a surprised faun, on whose shoulders the muscled stocky paws of a sleek-bellied lynx had just dropped from the top of a tree: sad but irremediable routine of the wild. . . . And noises of the brush bending before the passage of frightened animals, and mysterious sighs of love, of hate, murmurs of life and death, and amazing things

that no man will ever know completely, things which to intrigue us nature sometimes writes on the snow in a short breath-taking chapter.

The three men brought to these spectacles a curiosity that was equally ardent, but of a vastly different color. For the two half-breeds, it was the beautiful book of nature opening before them, always the same, but always amusing. Amusing was the real word that expressed it. They would greet with a happy smile the flight of startled ducks that—quack! quack!—chopped the water and beat the air with whistling wings; or the raging agony of a wounded lynx, as it turns its great round eyes on the hunter and, suddenly backing its ears, uncovers long tufts of gray hair shaped like kiss curls.

But Smith meditated on these ways of nature. Puritan and great reader of the Bible, his faith was headstrong and magnificent, infinite and deliberated, holy and cruel, in a certain people elected of God—the only people among so many called. History had taught him that faith could make of a beer brewer a man of empire. He is not a Puritan who does not believe that Anglo-Saxon superiority dates from

Cromwell. And perhaps the Puritans are right. The wise activity of the muskrats does not keep them from being eaten by the martins; the patience of the bee does not safeguard its honey from the gluttony of the bear; the innocence of the roebuck stops not the hunger of the wolf. . . . All is permitted, willed by God.

Here, Smith would think of the two young half-breeds, mediocre in good as well as in bad, little endowed as to the mind, but of a rather straight heart. He was fond of them, because these two companions shared his miseries and his dangers without complaining. He was fond of them, but with that sort of lofty indulgence which made him count their faults indifferently, faults of their nature. Like all handlers of men, he had interested himself in their lives and knew their desires and hopes. He had promised Jeremy to be present at his marriage to Flora. To himself he had promised to make a suitable gift to the young couple.

He was convinced that when his goal had been attained, later, in a few years—it might be many—attained by him, or by others, many things would then change in this West-Canada which he dreamed

of conquering, of binding to Lower-Canada on one side, and to British Columbia on the other. Yes, many things would change. But without doubt these changes, happy for the Empire, would be accursed to the native inhabitants of the Colony and their descendants. Fine honest fellows—he knew they were to be esteemed. Monseigneur Provencher, Father Martin, Riel, and yet others would be more or less the victims of a new order of things. Rascals would despoil brave men. Bandits—this Benard, for example—would grow rich. But the Empire would march on. Thus the daily spectacle of life and death in nature confirmed Smith in his dream of imperialism.

VI

A FEW days after the departure of Jeremy, Charlie Leslie, cut to the quick by the sarcasm of old Mother Lespérance, and more and more smitten with Flora, began to meditate a revenge that at one stroke would serve his love and his desire for vengeance.

One night he hastened by an out-of-the-way path which wound through the woods toward the hut of Virginia MacNab, an old widow who had a reputation for power with herbs, in other words a sorceress.

Her reputation, at first whispered from ear to ear—people feared not only the ecclesiastical thunderbolts, but the power of the mysterious and unknown as well—had not failed to cross the thresholds of the little circle of old squaws in quest of miraculous remedies.

Monseigneur Provencher was much affected by it.

He had little faith in the famous and diabolical interventions described by credulous and half-stupid creatures, following upon unreasonable terrors. But he attached great importance to the principle in question, and condemned Virginia MacNab for her deceit, superstition and sacrilege. Other priests, leaning upon certain Latin texts, ill-digested in the dusty folios of the seminaries, believed in sorcery as firmly as the half-breeds themselves.

The MacNab crone had the power of easing the most rebellious accouchement by rubbing the child-bedeviled stomach with the scales of a rattlesnake. She compounded strange philters into which went the powdered horns of stags, the pulverized root of that plant of the marshes which the *métis* called, not inappropriately, beautiful angelica; thereto she would add a bizarre mixture of herbs, of leaves from a prayer book, burnt and powdered—but how had she come by this little edible library?—and incantations where the most astonishing Hebrew words hobnobbed with those of archaic Indian dialects—the Delaware for example.

What French ancestor had brought the peasant customs of the Sabbath into Canada, had recog-

nized adepts among the dissident rites of the savages, had amalgamated the most diverse practices and handed it all down to some descendant?

There was, at that time, but one black cat in the whole colony, and it was possessed by Virginia Mac-Nab. She had tamed a grandduke. She had neither frog nor serpent; but she kept a badger which spent its life rolled in a ball in front of the fire, dozing in warmth with the cat.

In the cabin eight feet square, almost half of which was occupied by the pallet, the old hag one night confessed Charlie Leslie, a night of rain and wind, which rendered the thing all the more frightful. It cost him, this simple confession, a little heifer he had just weaned.

This lofty price having made him trustful, he promised to return the first night of wind after the full moon, with some object belonging to Flora, or something which had touched her person, or been part of her. But a hair was the most potent thing. Incidentally, he was advised to augment by one cow the old woman's flock of cattle. Thereafter the great play would proceed. For the future—ah, yes!—for the future they would look into the coffee grounds.

But first Charlie was obliged to surrender the silver ring he had from his grandfather and which he wore so proudly on his little finger.

Moreover, he swore the most frightful oaths that he would reveal to no one what he might see or hear.

* * *

After the full moon, the weather was propitious. The second night was wet and dark; at intervals a furious wind bowed the crest of the forest in rage.

The cow which Charlie was leading behind him kept up a most mournful lowing and tangled her rope in the trees. Leslie unwound her in a blasphemous transport, which added to the demoniac solemnity of the thing. Floundering along in water and oozy clay, he narrowly escaped falling at each step.

He reached the sorcerer's house with his heart pounding, aware that if he should this night die unconfessed, his soul would be the prey of the devil.

His teeth chattered so that the hag could hear him trembling. When she had prodded the cow and manifested her satisfaction with the beast, she brought Leslie into the hut to warm himself by the fire.

He would have voluptuously stretched his legs, booted with sticky mud, toward the flames, if the

old crone had not kept pressing him to recite *paters* and *aves*, she herself being engaged in shaping a bizarre statue of clay into which she introduced the hair filched from Flora. Charlie repeated the supplications in a voice so changed that it seemed to be the voice of a stranger. At length he became somewhat reassured, deciding that the profanation would be of no great importance.

When the old woman, ceaselessly muttering the most incomprehensible and frightful incantations, had finished her mannikin, there ensued a baptismal parody. The statue which the trembling Leslie stood godfather to received the name of Flora.

Then the witch made him swear again by his eternal safety not to reveal, even to his confessor, anything that was about to follow. Charlie swore, having in mind not to stand by that part of his oath which concerned his confessor, since after all it was probable that a servant of the Lord could annul promises made face to face with a slave of the devil.

He took part, then, in most strange and dreadful proceedings.

The hag disrobed to the skin; Charlie forced himself to forget Flora for the moment. The spectacle

of this withered flesh seemed certain to disgust man forever with woman—flesh the color of a moldy prune, hanging with formless objects that might perhaps once have been breasts. Then she threw a skin, fashioned as a sort of cope, over her emaciated shoulders and began a ridiculous travesty of a mass, using the bed as an altar. She gave the young man as sacrament a leaf burnt and dissolved in self-styled holy water; then she made him take the right hand of the statue in his own right hand while she pronounced the marriage ritual.

Thereupon she feigned an epileptic seizure, by way of doubly firing Charlie's imagination and at the same time arousing his generosity anew. He must have had a foreboding of this moment, for he had fetched along a little silver money, some American dollars and English shillings. These he dumped into the crooked fingers of her bony hand.

Fleeing into the night he experienced a magnificent confidence in the future, tempered it is true with intimations of hell, should he die suddenly in the night.

* * *

Mary-Rose Delorme, the poverty-ridden widow of

the half-breed slain three months past in the conflict with the Sioux, gave it out that she would hold a "raffle," better known as a lottery.

The wretched woman was making an effort to ransom from the poor heritage left by her husband—arms, saddles, bits of harness—the means of buying at least a cow that would give her a little milk. Despite the fatigue she was experiencing since her premature labor, she bestirred herself right and left at painful and ill-paid work, which permitted her to die lingeringly of consumption, but scarcely to eat enough to satisfy her hunger.

Many people are needed to make a lottery successful, and the best means of gathering them at Red River, even to-day, is to offer them dancing for the evening.

Although quite sure of never having it returned, the generous Marie Riel advanced flour for making the cakes, and old Gosselin promised to come with his violin—that enchanted violin which made music such as neither man nor woman could resist, from the first measure on.

Lespérance, suffering with rheumatism caught on a cold night passed in hunting ducks in the marshes

of La Fourche, kept his wife at home with him, tending and rubbing him with scorching-hot teasing.

This daily ceremony, carried on now for several days, was never ended without both parties exchanging all the insults, legitimate and bastard, born of all the dialects known to the country.

It turned out to be Charlie Leslie who fetched Flora to and from the dance. Father Lespérance accepted the arrangement with indifference, Mother Lespérance with joy. Flora's opinion of it was never made known.

* * *

The lottery passed like all great public reunions where even the undesirable have the right of access, so long as they buy chances. The crowd pressed into the stable old Lengen had lent to his sister-in-law for the occasion. Gosselin was enthroned within, surrounded by the respectful young. He attacked his violin with superb authority, turning tranquilly proud eyes upon the assembly, for he knew that none of the young virtuosos could, like himself, play on two strings at once, and that no one knew such a complete repertory of tunes as his own.

The widow offered Riel the place of honor: he

was to sit at the table, draw up the lists, receive the money, watch the fall of the disc, mark the throws, organize the preliminaries, the eliminations, the semi-finals, the finals. But the chief declined the offer and appointed Norquay. This choice excited a pleasant surprise and it was concluded that a change had come to pass which would put an end to the hostility of the two great chieftains.

They were only half mistaken. Riel wished to let affairs mellow. For a son had been born to him, bearing the name Louis. The father, proud of this fine big boy, was in a certain measure preparing to abdicate in his son's favor. He was beginning to realize that his own imperfect education would always stand as a barrier between him and real rulership. Therefore he was making up his mind to be reconciled with what he was—the most influential man in the settlement—and to pass on this influence to his son, who he was determined should have a good, solid education. Had not Monseigneur Provencher promised them—himself, Goulet, Norquay—to make the eldest son of each a learned man capable of handling the highest affairs?

The floor vibrated to the rhythm of the jig, the

clog dance, the sword dance—weapons being replaced by crossed sticks. The wenches flaunted themselves; girls, flushed and perspiring, risked pneumonia to obey the call of gallants who led them into the forest. Drunks rolled in the corners.

Charlie did not quit Flora's side the whole evening. Lottery followed lottery. Large Veronica Mac-Ivor had first won the carbine of the defunct Zephirin. Indifferent to wedlock, having enjoyed all its pleasures with none of its cares, thrice having given to the world bastards of ambiguous paternity which she settled on friends as one settles puppies—having no husband in mind whom she might honor with the gift of this masculine appurtenance, she turned back the firearm to be raffled anew. She had promised the widow a fourth of the money thus earned, and such generosity was commented on favorably. Veronica made several vain advances toward Leslie, who had contributed somewhat to the first of the unfortunate foundlings. Nevertheless she showed herself satisfied with the chance Leslie bought for Flora, which Flora did not win, having from the first lottery drawn such ridiculously low numbers that she was complimented on her future luck in marriage.

Charlie also resisted the eyes of the little Adélina Bruce, whose simian face was perversely attractive. She had been many times surprised with men, in circumstances that left nothing to the imagination.

It was with Flora that Charlie danced all the jigs, all the clog dances, and, hand in hand, all the lively reels. Oh, with what delivish verve did Gosselin play the Scottish air *As I Look Back To Bonnie Aberdeen!*

Those in the crowd aware of the recent betrothal were indignant. Flora was pointed out accusingly. It was well enough to dance two or three times with Leslie, since he had been kind enough to escort her through the forest, which shuddered with those little noises that make girls tremble. But most of the dances she should have given to others.

Flora was quite unaware of all this. Grieving for the absence of her betrothed, she was trying to forget the pangs of chagrin for a moment.

Her palm pressed to Charlie's caressing palm, restless with the intoxicating warmth he gave forth, she suffered less. An agreeable sensation came over her, so vague, so different from what she had felt against Jeremy that, naïve, it never occurred to her

to think of harm. And Leslie, too, was such a fine dancer.

The grinning face of the old sorcerer smiled strangely at the young man. Certainly, by that wink of the left eye, suddenly vanishing into the reddish wrinkles like a turkey cock's neck, she was telling him to profit by the occasion. . . .

Before the crowd began to leave, Flora found herself with Leslie—she scarcely knew how—on the road toward home. She leaned to him closely, for the mysterious noises of the night frightened her. Master of the art of pleasing girls, Leslie enticed her laughingly—at first. . . .

She did not protect her mouth, for at that moment a shiver ran through her.

She murmured:

“You’re making me faint.”

In a moment he had triumphed.



VII

AT the beginning of November, Smith wrote the following letter to a friend in Ottawa.

"My dear William:

"I could not make any explorations either yesterday or today. But if you wish to know about where I am, imagine yourself in the neighborhood of longitude 105° west (Greenwich), latitude 52°.5 north—in a country where the isothermal lines of winter have fallen indeed low, the natural consequence, I think, of the boredom begotten of these frozen solitudes.

"You know all my hopes and ambitions. Already I've given five years of my energy, trying to prove to inactive governments, short-sighted and understanding nothing but day to day profits, that an immense empire lies sleeping in the west. A Frenchman, who has done a great deal of harm to his own country, but so much good to some others—ours for example—that they should vote him a statue by public subscription, has characterized this land as *a few wretched acres of snow!* I am quoting from memory. You know well

enough that I do not waste my time dragging the works of a poor philosopher along with me, good writer though he be. The few cubic feet such nonsense would take up are better filled on my sleds with the greatest possible amount of provisions and a little tobacco, since the creator has given only kénic-kénic to the savages. As for books, I am satisfied with a small, ancient and well-worn Bible from my mother, which opens quite naturally to the pages where I learned to spell. I always carry it with me.

"John Knox and Cromwell, there are men for you who stand as a symbol of empire.

"Each time I open the old tome with faded letters, I draw from it a spiritual energy, of which I often have need, I assure you, and which answers my aspirations of the moment as nothing else could.

"Don't think, however, that I am anything like a preacher. But these readings, which adjust so many things, deliver me from the effeminate and cowardly sentimentality which fear of responsibility puts so easily into the hearts of men who are vowed to a great purpose.

"You know what is meant by 'a great purpose.' It is always accompanied by a host of things—some good, some very bad. For these great purposes, we maintain a fleet of cannon, real cannon, that shoot, and an army of men in red uniforms who fought *the second best troops in the world at Waterloo*. We pay very dearly for having specialists, such as Nelson, who are great men when about their business (and of little significance when they have made fools of themselves over Emmas); we pay the highest price to maintain a little above all

other people the level of our national efficiency, from which fact it follows not at all that a poor semi-official devil of a surveyor like myself is rolling in gold. Make no mistake as to that.

"After the trouble I had in convincing men whose eyes see only through the little end of the telescope, and who let me leave only because they were afraid what they call my folly might become contagious, I have constantly to fight against all sorts of idiotic scruples, such as voices one always imagines in the solitude. When silent things begin to talk to you there's but two roads to take, the one remarkably like the other, however: either write a volume of verse, or betake one's self to the nearest asylum. But I haven't come to that yet, thanks to the daily reading of the Bible and the conclusion which this pious exercise permits me to draw from the spectacle of nature:

"The land of Canaan belongs to the chosen people."
"The figures on the note attached to my letter will give you some understanding of what this land of Canaan holds in wealth by virtue of its rich wheat lands and broad pasturage. And in three winters, I have covered but a dot of this immense country I should like to give to England.

"You will find in my papers at home all the notes relative to my preceding two explorations; the copies are doubtless sleeping in the dust of the old rough hide portfolio. My lodging-house keeper knows you well enough to make no difficulty when you ask her for the keys.

"Now here is what I expect from you. It may be that I shall return—I hope so, at least—and the dan-

gers of this trip are not so great that I wish to alarm you needlessly. But it may be, also, that I shall not return. One never knows. . . . There are always the tales of travelers frozen to death or starving in a snow storm, and the courier who runs between Fort Corne and Fort Garry is never sure of arriving at his destination.

"And I don't want my efforts to be lost to England . . . you understand. . . . Nor is one prohibited from thinking of one's self, or of one's own. My young brother Donald, who appears to have taken a decidedly deep bite into his engineering studies, will find a beautiful straight path all laid out for him in ten or fifteen years; he will have only to follow it. . . . And then lastly, there is that little spark of vanity which God has put in the heart of man to keep him warm when everything about him seems so cold.

"You have contacts with the press at Ottawa, at Toronto, and even at London. Start a campaign to arouse public interest in these lands. We must direct our directors.

"A France that let go a Canada and a Louisiana—think of it! This last extended to the 49° latitude and comprised the whole valley of the Mississippi and Missouri. This France may content herself with a collection of colonies, if she wishes. If she is rich enough to pay for these costly fancies, so much the worse for her. But we must people ours with England. It is not enough that they be red and green spots scattered on the map.

"They must be gold and silver.

"It is here that my suffering begins!

"Around me I see fine, brave men, the missionaries and a certain Riel, a half-breed; they are people of heart and sinew, and they are worthy of being English. We will call them, but they will not understand. They are Catholics and bow to Rome. We bow to God only, and receive from Him directly the glory of our sovereign mission. All other peoples equal among themselves—or nearly so—bend to the touch of our justice. It is the law and we are its chosen prophets.

"And I am overtaken with a sense of guilt when I think of these brave men being dispossessed and that such a one as this Riel, for example, will run the risk of being relegated to second place by such a rascal as Norquay, a lemon to be cast aside after squeezing. There is a debauchee by the name of Benard who will feather his nest richly.

Yet why do brave men not follow the right law? We shall make Englishmen of them; they are worthy of it.

"We shall call to us outcasts of the races. They will work for us, and those who have the stamina to merit the recompense will become citizens. The rest will perish of misery.

"But the law is the law, and we are the elected of God.

"And, for love of Him, William old man, if I return, warm me once more with a good bath. I should win Paradise for this vermin I'm devoured with.

"Pardon the impropriety of what this cry from the heart reveals.

"You understand, I am sure, and even if you do not understand, if something should happen to me, in

memory of me keep the spirit of England aroused, keep the spirit aroused and keep it living.

“I dream for the next autumn to come.

“Your confidant,

“R. W. SMITH.

“P. S.—Tell Donald for me to keep working hard. The papers that may interest you are sewed in the envelope of skin.

“R. W. S.”



VIII

AS soon as the snow had taken full possession of the world—it came the middle of November, after a raging tempest that lasted three days—Smith left Fort Corne, where he had rested nearly a week, and set out by little marches in the direction of Lake Plume.

The Cree Indians, whose hunting was exploited by the agent at the fort, furnished the explorers two good four-dog teams, eight robust animals, each capable of hauling its hundred and fifty pounds. These were more than enough for transporting the baggage, for Smith had reduced it to a strict minimum.

There was the light tent made of doubled silk. Much heavier was the pack of Scotch wool covering, and the warm buffalo robes whose matted hair offered the wind an immediate and solid resistance.

The provision of flour was exhausted, with no means of renewing it. Smith consoled himself with the thought that, after all, flour was a perfectly useless luxury: savages got along without bread, so why should an Englishman, of superior stuff, be the slave of a habit? . . . There was a little pemmican, which they husbanded as much as possible; the forest would give them elk, deer or roebuck, with hazel-hens to vary the monotony. And as a last resort, there were the rabbits; they were now completely white, whiter than snow, with only the little black points of their eyes and the two black spots of their ears, so easily hidden by laying them back on their heads. They had shot and powder; finally, there was the theodolite—a marvel in polished copper for which a Cree chief had offered ten silver fox pelts—and a whole assortment of sextants, of compasses, of watches which had to be wound every day and which were beginning to grow sensitive to the cold; and various instruments which Jeremy and MacDougall manipulated only with the greatest concentration and fear of dreadful misfortunes, lest something should happen to break them.

Jeremy had made harness for the dogs out of

rawhide, the collars well padded with reed-grass. He had taken the greatest care to mould to each dog the harness destined for him.

MacDougall had acquitted himself with fine skill in making the sleds. They were eight feet long, well balanced, of birch carefully polished with a piece of broken glass. The broken whiskey bottles, drained by the besotted agent at the fort, served a purpose after all. The front of the sleds were given a graceful upward curve to keep them from smashing against hidden stumps.

As soon as this first blizzard had subsided, the three men put on their snowshoes, five feet long, and started out Indian-file across the soft snow, trampling a path for the dog-drawn sleds.

Smith began once more to take an inventory of the prairie's treasures. It was no longer a question of scratching every few steps in the snow to determine the richness of the earth. Instead he was obliged to trust to indications given by the appearance of the trees.

The lean aspens, the little stunted hollow oaks, the alders mimicking hazel trees, plainly indicated a poor sandy soil. By a miracle of equilibrium, the

larches and gray willows were able to stand upright in the moss floating on the ooze. Wherever giant ash trees spotted with dark wrinkles spread with elms and maples over a thick undergrowth of saskatoons and willows, one could be sure that the earth was rich in mold.

They advanced noiselessly into these solitudes, their snowshoes grating on the soft frozen snow, snow without body, which the slightest wind rolled like a ghostly aura over the surface of the shroud.

Strange unearthly winter landscapes began to appear on the horizon, beyond the brush of all earthly artists.

The dawns were nebulous with a rose mist, the woodland wrapped in diamond veils: great white suns at midday, remote in a pale sky which made their lights a soft, cold nimbus. But the highest art was the reflections over the hexagonal prisms of the snow; soft roses and greens blended with white, pale yellows with violet mauves, faded blues with diaphanous orange. And when twilight fell, all of this slept somberly in a cameo blue, the snow clearer than the sky. Golden cloud rifts and sudden shafts of light from the moon struck fire from the scene—

just enough to gild the blue with green, Smith would say, however much of a poet he was not.

But that was the beautiful face of the world.

On other days, the air, frantic with cold, lost its head so far as to beget the sun twice, and incongruous rainbows—the weather being fine—and a timid little essay at The Cross of Malta. But one understood that all this was a pure hallucination on the part of the atmosphere, for, whatever its talent, it could equal neither the diameter nor the luminous intensity of the sun itself. There is not enough paint in the heavens for that. On such days, Smith had no need to consult his thermometer to know that 40 degrees, or thereabouts, was the order of the day. When the air, yet more wild with the cold, reproduced the sun by five, in the shape of a cross and still with the same inadequacy—despite the streamers of frozen colors that reached magnificently to the zenith—it was useless indeed to look at the thermometer: the mercury went dead and hung like a plummet in the bottom of the shaft.

During those days, the bones in the temples ached. The three men expected them to crack with a dry sound like the trees of the forest—like the quaking

aspens with their four frozen leaves that no wind was able to blast apart. The ice, gripped tighter and tighter by the frost, would crack with the sound of artillery, opening up fissures on the lakes. These chasms, to be sure, were immediately frozen over again. But within a few minutes, others were formed. Then wind would arise, the terrible wind sharpened on the needle-points of the ice-floes coming down off the Arctic Ocean or from the lost lakes of the North, piercing the fur robes to the skin.

Its intensity would increase, howling with rage in the crest of the forest and untopping the trees mercilessly, the dull sound of their fall coming mingled with the wind's roar. It would polish the floor of the prairie as with strokes of a great plane, rushed and undulating, roaring on with the noise of mills. The shavings of snow, lifted in scrolls and clamorously blown, would whirl in a gray dusk, darker and darker, collapsing at the least obstacle, gathering itself to form moving eddies—miniature mountains, fragile, ceaselessly demolished and built up again, under which disappeared even the tallest vegetation, passively bending under the weight of the snow and the maddened will of the tempest.

As soon as the wind rose, they had to make haste to the deepest woodland. If this happened to be in the direction of the wind, headway was painful in spite of the fur robes. They had to protect eyes and cheeks with their arms or be blinded. The suffering was intolerable, and the tears wrung from the eyes would freeze at once on the lashes.

Neither compass nor knowledge of the region could serve at such times in keeping one in the right direction. In broad day, in spite of the brilliantly clear sun glaring a hundred feet above the snow-storm, the density of the pulverized snow was such that one could not see ten steps ahead. White glooms which muffled sound, the sip-sip of the snowshoes, the confused words exchanged between the men, the crrr, crrr of the sleds ploughing quickly obliterated tracks in the soft snow—this was all that broke the ghostly silence.

Extremes met: the blast of the dry snow was so cold to the face that it burned like sparks.

Smith's eyes were frozen. For thirty-six hours he remained blind, of all things the most agonizing, morally, for however dark the night, the eyes are covered with a still blacker film, like a shroud, and

in the day, shadows light up with a feeble ray, sinister red like a reflection from hell.

It was on this occasion that Smith, for the first time, really heard voices that were not those of his companions, but a host of beings veritably and officially long since dead and buried, so well sent on with prayers of the Presbyterian church that it was impossible that their souls should ever rise and wander.

And since he knew what he was hearing was impossible, he would bite his lips until the blood came, to keep back stupid things which a man would blush for until his dying day.

Jeremy and MacDougall raised the most complicated sorts of architecture with snow and tree trunks, trying to keep the fire burning in the hole dug with a hatchet in front of the tent opening. They could scarcely stop broiling strips of venison, for one had to eat to fight against cold. The everlasting cold!

Ideas began to move more slowly through their brains, as if icicles had obstructed the channels. They spoke less and less of Red River, or at least when they called up its memory, it was like that of

some fabulous paradise . . . so far away . . . so far. . . .

It was not that any of them brooded on unusual dangers. This was the life of all those who worked for The Company, and they knew it. It was the way things happen, and after one has seen snow for days, weeks, months, and never a new human face to recall that one is not alone in the world, there are things that fall asleep in one's brain—a guardian sentinel, it would seem. Strange ghosts begin to haunt the imagination.

Just the same, the name of Flora would occur sometimes like a magic talisman in Jeremy's conversation. And it would seem to him that he could smell the odors of springtime, the mosses breaking through the snow and the willows burgeoning and putting forth their little gray buds like caterpillars.

Then MacDougall would make a clumsy allusion to something which should not have been recalled, things that bring tears, but which have the gift of causing the most intelligent men to laugh stupidly; and Smith, smiling to himself, would hide his nose in his Bible, that thrice frozen nose which now carried a dark, wrinkled pellicle in place of its natural skin.

As winter advanced, the blizzards became more and more frequent and more severe.

And to get all that was possible out of the rare short days of calm,—January had scarcely more than five or six hours of light—Smith began to overwork.

Not for the world would he have admitted the fatigue that dragged at his legs, his groins, or the pain in his toes caused by the snow packing against the straps of the snowshoes. The heat from the foot melted the snow, which would freeze and turn the straps to icicles; and these pressed wickedly on the soft moccasins.

Exhausted, he would walk along with his head held high, hoping vainly that one of his companions would suggest an end of the day's march. Smith had long since been worn out when the dogs, first of all, began to show that they had suffered enough. They would halt suddenly and bite at the snow, which stops neither thirst nor hunger. Then they would lie down a moment, tongues lolling between paws, flanks panting, a question in their gaze. They would not budge until a crack of the whip made the hair fly. Head hanging, a dog would start off pulling to the

side, with now and then a growl from his fellow ahead who was having to pull double. It would all end in traces being jumped, followed by a serious battle.

Near Plume Lake, Smith went blind for the second time. He was perspiring, stretched out on his blankets, a symptom which filled Jeremy and Mac-Douggs with deep anxiety. Jeremy searched the whole marsh for root of *belle-angélique*. By digging down through the drifts with his snowshoe, he came finally upon a tuft. He cut into the frozen earth with his hatchet to get enough of it for an infusion.

Smith finally began to be visited by people who would have been highly surprised to meet one another in the same brain; these spoke in the most stupid fashion in the world. There was a young girl with rosy cheeks and golden hair, who long ago had refused Smith at a time when he was poor. She had become Madame Mac-somebody, a devoutly religious person faithful to duty. She had no business calling Smith by a long forgotten pet name. Nor should she have offered to marry him in recompense for what he had suffered for England. . . . And there came a registry clerk who once long ago—how many

years, how many centuries was it?—Smith had struck for having lost a document to which the explorer attached some importance. As a matter of fact, he had almost risked his life twenty times a day for a whole year to establish that paper. The clerk now came fitted out with the most amusing little horns. Where in the devil had Smith seen such a thing? He flayed Smith's chest with a green hatbox tied with red ribbons. . . . There was the most astonishing beggar imaginable, clad in rags, who resembled the harlequin of some Italian comedies in a book that had delighted Smith's youth. This outcast seemed to bend under the misery of the ages, and ever and anon he would lift himself and cry out: I am the pariah of Red River! Immediately he would dissolve and be suffused with the mud of the marshes. . . . Cities, built of doll houses, would arise as if by enchantment, and a great wind would pass thereover, and the cities would be swept away in a biblical deluge, and the huts would people themselves with animals like Noah's ark, and the old beggar would surge up and blaspheme Smith, the creator of all this *universiculus*. Smith would spell out the barbarous Latin word which Kobolds were forging in

his brain with great agonizing blows. Two shapes were fitting about him, and surely they were the Babes in The Woods. These two babies, who gave themselves the names of Je-re-my and Mac-D-d-d-ougg, accused him of being their wicked uncle. . . . Finally, Smith's mother, smiling as she had been before a bad cough carried her away, leaned over her child to tuck it in and say to it: Don't show your feelings. Then Smith would bite his lips to keep from talking foolishly, for he had to remember that he was in the company of half-savage strangers.

But the *belle-angélique* had its effect, and a new Smith, haggard and incapable of standing on his legs—evidently collapsible at far many more places than those known to anatomists—let himself be nursed like a baby by Jeremy and MacDoug, who would look at him with the kindly soft eyes of big dogs.

Smith asked for his Bible and read until the verses were graven around his head like a spiked crown of red-hot iron.

During the two days that followed, he grew more calm and his condition seemed improved.

Without, there fell a wondrous cold, windless and

sun enchanted, one of those temperatures that freeze a man without his knowing it. Jeremy went out to kill a roebuck and narrowly missed losing his right hand. He had made the mistake of removing his glove so as to be prepared to shoot. He had just seen tramplings on the snow in the shape of a figure eight, which told him that the animal was trying to hide its traces before turning to lie down. Jeremy was not aware of the cold until suddenly he was surprised by that acute agony, half stinging, half like a crack from a whip, that stabs the skin through an imperceptible opening, into which rushes the cold, a cold that instantly spreads under the skin in great livid splotches. He rubbed snow on the affected place in time to escape probable gangrene. It required an effort not to hold his hand to the fire. Instead, they dashed pans of water on the frozen area. . . .

Smith's head was suffering less. Some verses from the Bible had soothed the pain, or at least submerged him in a pleasant stupor.

At the request of the sick man, MacDougall melted a little bottle of ink which had been carefully kept in reserve in a mysterious bag, part of the contents

of which Smith had burned. It was a matter of letters and MacDouggs, not knowing how to read, felt no curiosity.

The morning of the third day, the invalid called the young men to his side. They were struck by the profound change in his face and the white thinness of his nostrils. It was this that had frightened Jeremy most.

Smith spoke in such a subdued tone that they could hardly hear him. He told them that he was going to die, in a voice so faint that none could have said whether his words trembled or not. . . . He divided between the two boys what money he had with him, carried in a belt of hide. It was much more than he had promised them. He gave them also a paper which he had written the night before—a last will and testament of the fine loyal service they had given him.

Almost at once, as if only this last act of goodwill had delayed him, he surrendered to the death rattle.

Jeremy and MacDouggs, with a curiosity as innocent as a child's, watched the last agony of this man of an alien race.

He died with tight lips, without a sound—like a gentleman.

* * *

After Smith lay still, the two half-breeds fell to brooding. Winter was approaching its close, and it was doubtful if they could travel the seven or eight hundred miles by sled. Just what solitudes separated them from Red River, they could not tell.

Should they carry the body back to Fort Corne to be buried there? Should they try to make Red River, so that a Father of Smith's faith might pray over the remains? Should they thaw the ground with fire and dig the Englishman a tomb, here where he had died?

Although the second way seemed the most difficult, the two half-breeds adopted it with one accord. In the first place, they were religious to the point of superstition, and, although Smith had never expressed an opinion on the subject of burial, still they feared he would be displeased if they did not do their best to let him sleep with the benefit of clergy. There were tales of ghosts that wandered the prairie; and Lake Plume was not so far from Red River that a soul grieving for company could

not reach forth an arm and draw to it old friends, for the sake of chatting about good old times gone by. And then Fort Corne was due north. The agent there was Presbyterian and could possibly read over the body the words needed for it to be shut up in its clay tomb. Which meant they would have to cross forests so choked with fallen trees on days of tempest that the most one could hope for in the great snows with a sled would be five to seven miles a day; either that, or risk getting lost on the prairie and exposing themselves to the full blast of all the winds and snow storms which would lurk for still six weeks more in the skies.

Otherwise, they could follow south the edge of the great forest, which would protect them somewhat from the wind and also offer them means of food along the way. Off there, two or three hundred miles, perhaps more, perhaps less, MacDougall declared they would come to the Qu'Appelle river, which plunged into the Assiniboine; thus they would have a fine road over the snow which lay soft on the deep bed of ice. It was just this that was needed for the starved gaunt dogs.

All night long the eight huskies howled a death-

watch, answered from the horizon by a wolf chant, higher and mournful, weeping the end of Smith.

In the morning the corpse was already stiff and frozen. The half-breeds melted a little snow, wet a piece of canvas found in the Englishman's baggage and wound it about the body, making a temporary shroud of ice for it.

They lashed the rigid form to one of the sleds, and slowly, at the rate of fifteen or twenty miles a day allowed by the rather open country and the indulgence of the wind, they began the long and funereal voyage home.

* * *

They walked for days before recognizing Lake Croissant, to whose shores MacDougall as a child had accompanied his father, long long ago. That night, when they halted, they covered Smith's body with snow to hide its odor from the wolves. Yet this was useless, for the howling of the dogs served to draw all beasts near and far. Then the two men knelt and recited fragments of all those prayers which fluttered at memory's end in their consciousness, and which—they believed it devoutly—had the power of a talisman.

One night, through the roar of a tempest, they thought they heard the voice of Smith. It was Jeremy who first called it to the attention of his companion. MacDouggl was asleep, huddled to the warmth of his comrade under the blankets.

Jeremy pushed him with his elbow:

"Listen, boy. . . ."

"What is it?"

"Don't you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"Smith. . . . He's talking."

"No one else," said MacDouggl.

Jeremy had counted on his friend reassuring him; when he felt MacDouggl trembling against him—it was not from cold—his teeth began to chatter. Suddenly he got out into the night, followed by MacDouggl. In the rising storm, they realized that they would die of starvation if they wandered away and got lost from the tent, the food and the guns. Mutually encouraging each other to return, they huddled together under the blankets, experiencing the most ghostly horrors until dawn.

Despite two or three such alarms, they had the courage not to abandon the dead.

They arrived with the body at the Qu'Appelle river, just when the southwest wind was beginning to blow so softly over the snow that dark patches of earth seemed to grow before their eyes.

Jeremy was afraid the ice had rotted in the river. But it was not so, and after a trial, they decided to follow the Qu'Appelle to its union with the Assiniboine. Thus it was possible, in spite of the gauntness of the dogs, to make at least twenty-five miles a day.

* * *

At Crooked Lake, they rested several days in a little post of the Hudson Bay Company, where a lone employee, a Scotch deserter, kept a seraglio of six squaws for his personal use. He had once been a seaman, mate aboard a whaler. The clearest of his tasks was to buy whiskey and to keep the ladies of his harem in cotton stuffs of light blue and rose. Alcohol had made him but an honorary husband, for which his ladies consoled themselves with the neighboring Indians. And there was born to MacGregor a considerable number of children who had no reason whatever to resemble him.

Jeremy and MacDougall would willingly have

drunk with the agent. Fortunately for them—for it would have cost them all the money they had on their persons—the provisions of the post were diminishing so rapidly that there was scarcely a hope that MacGregor would be able to renew them in time. He was persuaded that he would die the moment he could no longer get drunk. Also, the most tempting promises left him cold. He estimated his life above everything.

Jeremy and MacDougall took consolation in the six spouses—with such influence on the squaws' characters that MacGregor took the boys to his heart and spent all his efforts in keeping them from leaving.

But as soon as the dogs were fat and rested, the march began once more, with the corpse still borne on the sled.

* * *

It would be useless to tell how they reached the outskirts of Portage de la Prairie at the moment the snow was melting and running in icy rivulets down all the slopes, forming mirrors in every little basin, on the banks of which grass was beginning to peep.

Already the black loons, heralds of spring, were

soaring in loving couples over the glacial ponds. The willow buds were bursting, and the snowbirds losing their pearl-gray coats.

It was impossible to venture farther by sled.

The two boys enveloped the corpse in a thick coating of soft snow, which would freeze at night, preventing the body from decomposing too quickly. At last they heard the breaking of the ice in the Assiniboine. And when finally it was achieved, with great crashes of uprooted trees and the caving of banks, they borrowed a float at the post and loaded Smith's body upon it. They arrived at Fort Garry just as the odor could not be hidden any longer.



IX

AT the beginning of April, a few days before the great thaw, Flora could no longer hide the accident that had overtaken her. Since that October dawn which had seen her return pensively and crawl with haste into her bed to hide her face under the cover and weep to her heart's content, she had tried never to see Leslie again. The thought of him terrified her.

Her confessor had soothed her after his fashion, speaking of a certain Magdalene. But that was a matter she understood none too well. Then he had pictured hells peopled with horned demons, so clever in the art of torment that Flora thought surely they must have been corraled among the dead of the Sioux. (Flora would not admit for a second that the blood of a Sioux grandmother ran in her own veins.) The confessor had seized the occasion to

hold forth against dancing, that device of the devil for entrapping young men and girls in mortal sin. Naturally he told Flora that she should marry Leslie. Whereupon she had wept, vowing to the priest that she loved Jeremy, that she was his betrothed. And then the ecclesiastic tried to explain to her what was meant by "error on one's person," and got from her a promise—the occasion of new weeping—to tell her fiancé of her "accident."

After the confessional, Flora had successfully avoided Charlie Leslie for a week. But unfortunately, Jordy Norquay was marrying his daughter to one of the La Jimonnière, and Flora stood as maid of honor with Leslie. He came to fetch her in a little two wheel cart. The circumstances permitted the young half-breed to busy himself so with Flora that he lost the road in the dark; and in spite of her pleading and blows, he lifted her from the cart, laid her on the frosty grass and obliged her to follow where he led.

When she reported this relapse into sin to her confessor, she found herself deprived of absolution, despite her protestations of having yielded to force.

For many days she suffered cruelly with the

thought of eternal damnation in the other world, and there grew within her a terrible hate for Charlie Leslie.

He came several times to visit with Lespérance; the girl would receive him in fierce silence, and the father with taciturn indifference. The attention of the old mother was but poor consolation.

At length, he announced that he was going to spend the winter in the forest, trapping "pichou" and "foutreau," by which he meant lynx and martin. He would not return until the end of March, when pelts were no longer good.

Several days after the departure of the young man, Flora realized with terror that she was pregnant. She tried a few of the old-wives' remedies which she had heard young girls praise in whispers; but the desired results were not obtained. Twice she went as far as the doorway of Mother MacNab, the sorcerer, who was said to have helped girls in trouble. At the moment of entering, she would grow frightened and turn away with the fear of dying in mortal sin.

She passed the winter sadly, refusing to take part in the dances. Old Lespérance complained of

his rheumatism, which gave him a pretext of sending his women to cut wood in the forest.

Flora underwent this rough work with joy, pulling down dead trees killed at the root by fire, so tough that they dulled the best ax. Knees in the snow, sweating, hot and cold at the same time, she would ply the ax with great rhythmic blows, piling the sled with the fallen trees from which she had cut the branches, chopping the trunks into sections. It was her hope that this painful labor, forbidden women with child, would bring on a fortunate accident. But however painful and dragging seemed her loins as she returned to the house, bearing an enormous armful of snowy wood which her father piled methodically in the cracked clay chimney corner, still she remained desperately pregnant, without hope.

She went out of her way to irritate her mother, in hopes of receiving a beating. The hope was not in vain, but the unmerciful blows produced no merciful consequences.

At night, she would sit in a corner, silent and desolate, regarding her flanks sadly.

She took special care not to be seen by the neigh-

bors. She knew the malevolence of the women, who had defamed Julia Ritchott in the same circumstances. The thick fur coat she wore on Sunday to go to mass, in the old sled drawn by the horses, jingling with their sleighbells, still served to conceal her shape.

But when the gossips would come to sit and chat with Mother Lespérance in a medley of all the tongues of the West, Flora had surprised certain curious looks resting upon her.

To be sure the matter went no farther than:

“Your daughter’s sick?”

The speaker would pause in the midst of knocking the ashes from her pipe, drawing the attention of the old woman to her daughter’s haggard face. Flora would quickly arrange her skirts in folds, to hide her swelling.

Nevertheless, in the first week of April—Flora had been with child five months—she showed her size so plainly one day that her mother realized the truth.

While Flora wept, with great stirrings under her diaphragm, the mother called Lespérance who was stretched fully clothed on the bed, smoking his pipe

with a beatific air, although in the morning he had laid claim to the sharpest pangs of rheumatism.

"Eh, get up quick, good for nothing! Come look at your daughter, the whorish slut!"

"Now what ails thee, woman? Has the house got on fire?"

"Worse! Look at her belly, the sow . . . shssh! shssh! shssh! . . . your sow of a daughter."

There could be heard the heavy sound of old Les-pérance leaping from the bed in his soft moccasins, with all the agility of a young man of twenty.

"Well! So this is it! This is it! Almighty God above! The bitch! . . . God help us, it's true!"

"Ah, husband, my husband! Well may you shout! Shssh! shssh! . . . No one but you brought this down on us."

"I?—And what had I to do with it?"

"Yes, you, wretch! It was you dragged upon us that accursed Jeremy. Shssh! shssh! . . ."

"Then he'll marry her, the slut."

"He's likely frozen stiff, devoured to the last bone by the wolves. Shssh! shssh! . . . A fine husband dead skin and bones will make for a girl with child. Shssh!"

"He'll come back, woman. Have I not said it!"

"Shssh! shssh! . . . Not in this world! shssh!
. . . shssh! . . ."

In the long run, Lespérance, quite persuaded that it was Jeremy who had "brought all of this on them," seemed to feel the pain of it less. He hoped, to be sure, that the strapping lad was not such a novice as to let himself die of hunger and cold on the prairie; he wanted him to come back and repair his damage. But suddenly Flora interrupted her tears to announce, breathing heavily:

"It wasn't Jeremy. It was Charlie Leslie. It wasn't my fault—he forced me."

Then the anger of Lespérance rose suddenly beyond bounds. He seized an ash stick that served as a poker—so sooty that his hands were blackened—and brandished it over Flora's head, threatening to fell her.

This time, it was the old woman who, with a sudden change, stopped the arm of her husband. The moment Charlie became the man, it was her time to triumph.

"Shssh! shssh! . . . You see now, heartless sot. Shssh! . . . shssh! . . . You would marry her—

shssh!—to that wastrel! Shssh! shssh! . . . You can see what you've caused by it. . . . Shssh! shssh! . . . She didn't love him, your Jeremy dog! Shssh! shssh! . . . She loved Charlie. Shssh! . . . Shssh! . . .”

“You can see she didn't—since he forced her to it.”

“And you believe, innocent fool, that a woman lets herself be taken by force? Shssh! shssh!”

The harpy burst into a laugh, meant as an insult to her husband. Whereupon Lespérance had recourse to the supreme argument. With a formidable punch, he boxed his wife's fat wrinkled face and taking a little money he had in reserve, made off in the direction of Benard's, leaving the two women weeping miserably together, each in an opposite corner of the room.

Along the way, he spread the news of his daughter's shame to all who would listen. And he accompanied this recital with all possible blasphemies, the better to give it the ring of truth.



The news, as usual, flew from mouth to mouth, so that in all the settlement there was no conversation that did not start with these words:

"Flora Lespérance, she's made herself foolish with Charlie Leslie."

There was not much indulgence in the comments of the women.

The men laughed about it as a good joke.

* * *

It was the following Saturday that Charlie Leslie returned from the woods. Strangely, he had met no one on the road to congratulate him—with the usual irony mixed with envy—for having received the favors of such a beautiful girl. And so it happened that in the early morning, as he was passing the Lespérance cabin, he made haste to enter.

All the winter tempests, set one upon the other, were miserable affairs compared to the rush of words that left Lespérance's mouth when the old half-breed saw the seducer.

Charlie listened with hanging jaw, not understanding overmuch what it was about, since Lespérance, as it always happens, omitted first to give the young man the precise reasons for the outburst. Leslie reflected, lost.

He did not understand until Lespérance, in the manner of a peroration, said to him:

"And you're going to marry her, right now, since you got her with a bastard."

Then there came to light all the contrariness that can mass itself in the mind of a man who for ten minutes has heard himself addressed in the most insultingly expressive epithets; Charlie, with teeth clinched to show his tenacity, hissed the one word:

"No!"

Then he began to move away, for the face of Les-pérance forebode a tempest.

* * *

Leslie passed the afternoon drinking at Benard's. Madame Benard cast bawdy allusion in his direction and asked when the marriage would take place. Stubbornly set, he had resolved now not to marry Flora. He had no liking for being made ridiculous in the whole settlement. And after all, how did he know? A girl who had yielded to him so easily had perhaps yielded also to others. It was not that he was jealous of the past. No—the past is the past, and the present is the present. Two things quite different. Flora was a fine slip, that was true, and he had nothing to say. She would probably be a good wife, valorous in work. Nevertheless, he had had the best of Flora,

and he could profit, also, by the fame the adventure had brought him. Now he could look about him for other girls who wanted subduing. There was a very desirable little Ritchott. . . .

He drank a little more than was good for him, so much so that Benard recalled suddenly that he had an errand to run.

The husband out of the way, Madame Benard was able to make Leslie forget Flora for a moment. But the cost of it was dear to his pocket.

* * *

It being Sunday the next day, Charlie went to mass, as was his custom.

A little balmy wind from the southwest was blowing, the end of a "chinook," which brings to the prairie somewhat of the warmth of the *kuro-shivo*, and the snow blanket was melting in rivulets. Carts had replaced the sleds, and when their wheels passed over a late bank of snow, they opened it to the earth. Large black splotches of peat mud spotted the ground, where the young grass was making the first effort to turn green. Crows were cawing, and the first geese of the year, wandered too far north on the night track, were honking and turning back, fam-

ished, toward the kinder south. In old Ritchott's field, some wolves were courting a half-persuaded female, who seemed to be waiting for the strongest to have his way. It was a question, evidently, of a young she-wolf backward for her years, who had lacked nothing but this glorious day to conquer her last virgin bashfulness.

When Charlie hitched his pony to one of the willow stakes, destined to let the faithful pray without misgivings of an uprising among their mounts, already many parishioners had arrived. Most of the women were in church, but the men were still talking in groups near their wagons.

Approaching a band of young men of his own age, Leslie noticed Lespérance talking animatedly with the priest. The latter made an affirmative sign of the head, looked at his watch and hastened into the church.

Then all the loquacious followed in his train, and the most solemn hush fell, while the Father, according to the rites, donned the vestments of mass.

An awed respect bowed all heads. The faithful at Red River had at heart a very simple religion, very narrow and very solid, which influenced their deeds

but little yet made the observance of formal religious practices a condition *sine qua non* of salvation. This somewhat idolatrous way of being Christians wounded Monseigneur Provencher, and all that saved him from weeping in despair at the sight of all the adulteries committed by the most religious of his flock was his profound conviction that this faith of theirs, as yet only external, would end by impregnating their souls with all the Christian virtues. It would yet come, he believed.

All heads turned instinctively toward the interested parties when the priest announced that there was a promise of marriage between Charlie Joseph Leslie, eldest son, and so on, and Marie-Flora Lespérance. It was the outcome of a long meditation on the part of Lespérance, and he was, at the moment, very content with himself. The priest was quite unaware of the scene that had transpired the evening before at the home of Flora. He knew only of the pregnancy: devout ones, assured through age against all accidents of the flesh, had made haste to tell him in detail this interesting scandal; he had supposed that it was in accord with the young peoples' wish that Lespérance had asked him to publish

the bans, as quickly as possible, so that the marriage might be hastened.

After the mass, Leslie rushed on Lespérance with the intention of demanding a reckoning for the step he had taken, and of warning him that he, Charlie Leslie, proposed to annul the bans.

But he was anticipated by Lespérance, who left the church quickly. Before Leslie had time to protest the congratulations showered upon him from all sides like leaves under the wind of autumn, the father of Flora had taken him by the arm and led him to one side.

“Boy, let’s have no foolishness. You see what I’ve done. Take your choice: my girl and ten fine cows, or a bullet in the head, straight between the eyes. And I am damned, after it’s over, if Riel will have me hung for it.”

“But—”

“The young ought to be silent when the old explain themselves. You have heard what I said . . . you understood it. And who is there, my scapegrace, who will want this child of mine, now when everybody is laughing at her? And I, I am old, and my wife is old, and the day when we die, do we want to

leave the poor thing alone to perish of misery? . . . I have a few cows. You, you have goods, you have many goods even. You are better off at your house than I am at mine. Just the same, you know, ten cows more—that will swell your herd. Ten cows . . . with only a little luck, that's going to give you eight calves in June. All ten of them are heavy. Of course sometimes there are accidents—”

“Especially if you give me old cows that have dropped their calves two or three times.”

“Don't be afraid, boy. . . . Old Lespérance is an honest man. He's not one to play a trick like that on a son-in-law. Ah! I love my child—I love her. I would not wish to be crooked with her.”

“But just the same, Uncle, you don't want me to marry your girl before you're sure the little strip-ling is mine.”

“What! Will you make me bitter! When she tells you it's yours, you're going to deny giving it her?”

“That I won't deny. But do I know I am the only one?”

“I can promise you, son, that the little one has not prowled the whole winter. She would not go to the dances. Not out of the house. Ah! I didn't dream

she was sick. Sick! Ah, lad, a droll sickness. A congestion contracted somewhat low. A serpent's bite on the belly. Ah, Charlie, my boy, I can not blame you for having tried your luck. When I was a boy, as many of them as I could hook, I hooked. Only, I got no child. Ah! Curse me if I wouldn't have taken care of any I got! Joust with the lassies—that's all right. It's for the lassies to defend where they will. In that I can't blame you. But when a child is gotten, it needs a father. I shouldn't want it to be said that your papoose was given to others, to work its life out like a slave, because it was a bastard. You wouldn't want that, Charlie."

"And it's right that I am the only one?"

"I swear to you by all there is of eternal salvation." Lespérance raised his right hand. "You see the crucifix? Well, then, I swear by God in Heaven who was crucified on Calvary by the Jews and by the Protestants, that I may fall dead and be forever damned if I lie by one hair of my head."

For a moment, Leslie looked at the old man to assure himself that his terrible oath was not perjury. He knew it happened rarely that false oaths were punished immediately. Yet a man perjuring

himself under a solemn oath ought surely to make some slight sign of fear. But the face of Lespérance did not falter.

Besides, the question was to choose between ten cows and a bullet. It was possible that Lespérance might not hold strictly to the letter in the matter of the cows, or at least might select them from his flock as if for a gift to a friend. One holds on with no especial joy to a poor cow when she can be passed off as sound. It is not a sin. But after all, as the old fellow said, ten cows are ten cows. And that lovely little Flora. And even a wife—that was worth something, since she could cook such fine buns. And then that bullet . . . if by any chance it should be serious, it would be too late then to reflect.

“Well, boy—now’s the time to decide.”

“It’s all right, father-in-law.”

“You’ll come eat with us to-day. We have a goose.”

“Good, I’d like to. But it’s not for the goose, but because I don’t want to refuse you.”

“Are you in your cart?”

“Ah, no! I have my horse.”

Immediately thereafter Lespérance was laid hold

of by old Moise Dubois—a man with Indian features, white skin, and long golden hair that was turning white. The uncle of Jeremy was coming to the defense of his nephew.

“And now, cousin, what’s this the priest was holding forth on? Has your Flora forgotten her promise?”

“Ah, cousin, you know you can’t always do what you wish. And your nephew is perhaps at this moment dead on the prairie.”

“What! You could at least have been patient until the first fine weather. It is true that Jeremy ought by now to have returned, or the *Anglèche* should have sent news of the party by way of Fort Corne if he’s waiting for the thaw and means to make the way back in skiffs. Yet even so, you have hurried matters.”

“But, cousin, one can not always do as one wishes, you hear me!”

“Is what they are saying true?”

“One says many things, cousin. How can you expect me to know what you mean?”

“There are some who say— Oh! you understand, they tell lies without end.” Here old Dubois darted

a malicious eye at Lespérance to see whether his dart had struck home. "Yes, people like to tell lies—there are veritable fiends in the world. . . . But I hear . . . they are saying—"

"Deliver yourself, man!"

"And I am told that others than I may deliver themselves soon."

"You're told what?"

"Your Flora, cousin. They say that if she would leave off her fur coat, her waist would appear a bit round for one unmarried."

Lespérance wavered a moment between anger and the desire for conciliation. But he decided with reason that there was no good in becoming angry. After all, his daughter was not the first whom such an accident had befallen. He hunted his memory for names. Years ago and still years before that. . . . But all those were in their graves now. More recently, there was that little Ritchott . . . but it was best to leave the irascible and powerful Ritchotts unmentioned; they were friends of Riel as well as of the bishop. But besides the Ritchott girl, there was. . . . But what mattered now, there had not been a Dubois, at least none that he could remem-

ber. How agreeable this moment would have been, if he only could have thought of a Dubois.

While he stood there trying to gather his senses, his cousin Dubois made as if to leave. Then Lespérance caught him by his soft embroidered leather tunic and, playing his rôle like a superb comedian, began to weep:

“Ah! Cousin! It is not needful to be so hard on a little one. My Flora! A child I had raised so well . . . the only one left to me. My four sons! One killed by the Sioux, one dead of a consumption, two gone to the States, with no news of them for twenty years. Ah! I have wept for them! But Flora, all I have left of my children! And I have worked like ten men, ten good men, to see that she lacked nothing. And good advice! I tell her, do this, do not that. Watch your conduct. Keep a good name, respected by all. And don’t let yourself be taken in by boys. And her mother! But ah! to be sure her mother has the character of a dog, Sioux to the last drop. If it wasn’t boasting, I could tell you what patience I’ve needed. But an honest woman, yes, a good honest woman! Never have I grown asses’ ears because of her. No, never. *Sapré!* Not a bit of it! My wife her-

self set Flora a good example. Ah! Have I not been proud to have such a daughter! At this very moment, cousin, it would take a wheedler indeed to get by her."

"Then it wasn't Jeremy who brought off the coup?" Dubois questioned anxiously.

"Would it had been!" said Lespérance. "They would have married when he got back. But it seems it wasn't Jeremy who knew how to bring things to pass. The more the pity, for I tell you I would have been proud to have him one of my family. This Jeremy's a trump, and I like him well. But listen to reason, cousin. Would you want aught of a girl that loved you not?"

"But I was thinking she loved him, myself."

"It is plain otherwise—plain. Is it reason that a girl should bear child to another than her promised one?"

"The like has been known, cousin. And I have a word to say to you. There are those who say Leslie was seen at the witch MacNab's hut."

"What is this you say to me? He paid the hag to charm the girl?"

"I myself recognized a cow and calf among her

herd that once grazed with Leslie's. Beasts are like people—one knows them on sight. I questioned the witch. She answered me that she bought them of Leslie. But I have my suspicions—yes, I have my own notion of it.”

“Charm or no charm, it's all the same, cousin. What's to be done at this moment?”

“I don't know. Your shoes are not mine, and of that I am glad.”

“Ah! You're right! *Au revoir, au revoir!*”

“*Au revoir, cousin!*”

* * *

In the cart returning home, Flora gave way to her anger.

“And so you're going to marry me by force to this dog of a Leslie, papa! And if I will not? No one asked me if I would. Yes! . . . And if I won't be forced?”

“But, daughter, who is it that's going to raise this little brat, if you don't marry Charlie Leslie? A shamed girl has no choice in husbands.”

She pulled her red and blue checked blanket about her head and wept noisily, her face bent over her knees. Her shoulder shrank from her father's caressing hand.

Yet when the cart arrived at the cabin, she was sufficiently resigned not to become violent when Lespérance said to her severely:

"And you're going to try to show yourself gentle to your betrothed this midday, or you will hear from me. And I have spoken. I manage my household. You've but to walk straight. Hear you what I say?"

And when she made no answer, he added:

"Is your mouth sewed together? Would you had sewed tight something other than your mouth! Let me hear you answer. Is it yes?"

"Yes, papa," she replied, like one doomed.

* * *

Charlie arrived almost immediately, at the moment Mother Lespérance was warming up the meal prepared in advance. Flora was laying the table.

The young man did not quite know how to manage himself. He was greatly relieved when Lespérance, without giving him time to speak to the women, said to him:

"Come, son-in-law. I'll show you the cows while the women are getting our food."

Within the thatched byre, the sunlight entered between the chinks of the logs where the rough

plastering had been cracked in many places by the cold. The cows lowed on seeing the men. A sharp, warm stench arose with the reek of dung. One by one the beasts got up as Lespérance nudged them with his foot, hoisting first their bony rumps, caked with mud, before getting to their knees, contrary to the manner of horses which, like dogs, go back on their haunches before rising. Lespérance called this to Charlie's attention, that cows had acted thus only since the nativity of Christ. Their kneeling was in memory of the oxen at Bethlehem. Lespérance had this lore from his father, who in turn had it from his father, and so on, with the probability that there was some truth in it. Moreover, Leslie was not skeptical. And, too, his thoughts were on practical things.

He felt the rings on the horns, taking count of the animal's ages, verifying the results by an examination of the vertebrae in their tails, by looking at their udders, pinching their hides to determine its sleekness and to see if the cows were properly fat. After all, there was nothing to find fault with; his father-in-law was doing himself well, and Flora's dowry was made up of choice animals, with the exception of a single doubtful cow whose horns had

been sawed off. Lespérance swore it had been done solely as a protection from her ill temper, yet Leslie was somewhat suspicious. But taken as a whole, the lot was fair.

They returned arm in arm to the house, just in time to wash before sitting to table.

Leslie had been reared in accordance with the naïve and honest civility ingrained in the best stock of the settlement. Therein had been fused Scotch, French, and Indian customs, which combined not more badly than well.

"Take the place by your sweet, son-in-law," Lespérance said solemnly.

"Gladly, father-in-law."

"Ah, we have soup! Do you like soup?"

"Indeed, I do. I like nothing better than soup."

It was a formula Leslie had been taught at the rough hands of his father, and the speech now accompanied the arrival of each new dish, much to the delight of Lespérance, suddenly enchanted by this accomplished son-in-law.

Flora, silent during the entire meal, never once lifted her eyes from her plate. Charlie, moreover, seemed scarcely to notice her, but concentrated his

attention on Lespérance's talk. Eating with a will, as becomes a man satisfied with himself, the father recounted endless tales, exceeding ancient and equally tissue with lies.

When all was over, Charlie passively embraced Flora, straining his imagination to believe she had returned his kiss, smiling at the thought of a certain morning in October when—but that was a matter best left in the dark.

A young man of energy, built on Leslie's lines, finds pleasure in courting a girl who resists him. But when the work is done, and the result brilliant—getting a child, for example—he feels there is nothing left but to take it easy; he is bored. Spurred by the example of Hunt Morin, of Napoléon Lapointe and several others whose prowess was still on every tongue, Leslie intended not for a moment to abdicate in a field where the crown seemed in a fair way of coming to rest on his head; marriage, he felt, was scarcely a sufficient reason for abandoning a career that promised to be brilliant. Married men had enviable privileges, such as sitting at the side of married women, a thing unknown to celibates, something that offered the opportunity of exercising a

sport. Flora no longer was of interest; but marriage was a thing of the future for an experienced gallant. There were tales by the dozen, told at evening under the thatched roofs, when the smoke from pipes was thick and pungent, tales whose one purpose was to prove the truth of the matter. . . . For the moment, however, Charlie had no intention of pursuing petticoats. That was one thing not done when one was engaged. Not even Hunt Morin himself had been capable of offering that insult to Jenny Pruden. Though heaven knew what things he had made her look on after the ceremony! Then, too, there was that carbine of Lespérance which rarely missed its aim.

Charlie was not going to waste his time trying to make a dumb girl talk. Well might she remain that way after the marriage and not earn the nickname of "rook" as his mother had done. There was a saying that the old Leslie had done his time in purgatory while on earth.

And so Charlie, feeling a little money in his pockets, asked his father-in-law to come with him to Benard's, who had no scruples about quenching the thirst of true Christians on Sunday. Let it be

left to the pious Presbyterian storekeepers to lose money singing psalms.

Leslie and Lespérance found at Benard's certain habitués with whose assistance Charlie buried his bachelor days, laughing without offense at several direct allusions: there was mention of corn in the blade and other analogous things.

Lespérance became dead drunk as usual, and the future son-in-law, almost as drunk as the future father-in-law, grew tender for the latter and determined to share his fate. And so it happened that both waked the next morning in Benard's pig-sty, the one clasping the other. They were obliged to pool their memories of the evening before in order to recall its choicest bits.



It was two days later that Jeremy and MacDougall landed together on the muddy banks of Red River just across from Fort Garry, when the last floes of ice, melting hour by hour in the warm air, were starting on their journey to Lake Winnipeg, which they would never reach, at least in their solid form.

They judged the hour to be near midday, though the watch Smith had given Jeremy had long since

been broken by too great strength applied in winding. Yet the sun told them it was near noon, a sun already so warm that the last snows were hastening right and left in rivulets, saturating the earth, rushing toward the river, rising skyward in luminous, soft mists that veiled the far-away distances in blue. They tied up their boat and ran to the post. When the agent learned of Smith's death and heard that Jeremy and MacDougall had brought back his remains, a great stir arose. The Presbyterian missionary at Kildonan, who had so little to do that he sometimes turned an envious eye on his Papist rival, hastened to take charge of the corpse. It seemed, remarked MacDougall, with a sudden exuberance born at sight of his native ground, it seemed that the dead Smith had been a considerable person when alive.

Jeremy and MacDougall did not attend the burial, for they were not certain that such an act would be pardoned them in the other world; the prohibition against taking part in Protestant services was explicit. Monseigneur had called attention to it repeatedly, and all that affection of a faithful dog which Jeremy and MacDougall had carried over from

the living Smith to the dead Smith was not able to persuade them to venture one iota of their eternal salvation.

"Well, boy, my time's come for a drink, a hell of a drink. How do you feel?"

"Ah! buddy, not me! You can bet your last pair of soft shoes that not one damned drop will I drink until I've kissed the little one."

"Ah, well! It stands, just the same, that I must have a drink. But I understand your point. If I had a girl, the devil knows I'd see her even before changing my shirt."

"Then I'll see you later."

"So long."

Jeremy had hardly gone ten steps when MacDougall hailed him again:

"Don't forget I'm your best man." *Best man* was an imported expression to the half-breeds. It came by way of the Scotch whalers who sailed against wind and tempest amid the icebergs, until that day when a certain one of the crew deserted in a frozen harbor of the Hudson Bay Company, at the instigation of the agent in charge there.

Renewing his promise to MacDougall for at least

the hundredth time, Jeremy again set out light-hearted in the direction of the Lespérance cabin.

He came suddenly upon Flora with a pail of milk in her hand, and, at the sight of her former betrothed, she dropped the pail, the foaming milk spreading in gray splashes over the mud. With a startled cry, she fled toward the woods, covering her face with her arm. Whether it was to hide, or to ward off an imaginary blow, she herself could not tell. Jeremy bounded after her. He had become strangely lean, which helped him to run, and Flora, too, had reasons for not being nimble. And so he overtook her before she had gone ten steps. Grasping her in his arms, he uncovered her face and kissed her again and again.

Surprised that she defended herself from him and was silent, her eyes lowered, he said:

"Flora! My p'tite Flora! My chérie! What's the matter? Speak to me! What is the matter?"

She said very low:

"Do you know nothing? Haven't you noticed anything—heard anything?"

"But I'm just back, *nitimoush!* I've seen no one but you. I haven't spoken to a soul."

"Then you haven't noticed that . . . that . . ."

The words died in her stricken throat.

"You haven't noticed," she said, "that—that—that I have been a faithless girl?"

"Oh, Flora!"

Then realizing the truth, he saw her as she was, her beautiful slenderness all deformed with child. He dropped to his knees in the mud, covering his face with his hands.

"O Flora! Flora! My p'tite Flora! And I loved you so much!"

Kneeling beside him, her humble confession poured out in excuses.

"It wasn't my fault. Ah! I have suffered, too. It was at the raffle Mary Rose held. Charlie Leslie was there. He took me home. Then . . . We were alone on the road. . . . I did not want to—but he coaxed me by force . . . by force—I swear it on my hope of Paradise. . . . I did not want to. . . ."

"And . . . and . . . you did wrong other times?"

"At a wedding at Norquays. He was there. On the way, he forced me again . . . After that I did not go to dances . . . I didn't go out at all . . . only to mass. I did not go out, I swear to you. And then

one fine day, I saw I was carrying my shame. But I love you, Jeremy, I love only you!"

He pushed her away, more from chagrin than anger.

She continued:

"And there's something else I want to tell you. Papa told mamma that Charlie Leslie bought love philters from the old MacNab. That's what is being said. How was I to resist temptation bewitched with a philter? No one could do that. . . ."

Jeremy took a sudden breath.

"Swear to me that you're not lying, Flora. Can you swear to me that this story of the charm is true?"

"I will swear it by whatever you will. I heard papa tell it to mamma no later than last night. I swear."

"I understand," said Jeremy. "It was not your fault. And whatever happens, you and I will be married."

"But I haven't told you everything. Last Sunday, papa had Monseigneur announce the bans with Charlie."

"What! Torvieu d'chien! What had you to say?"

"I said nothing. What would you want me to say? I was helpless."

"Then you want to marry Charlie?"

"How can I help it? But I love you and I hate him. I hate him. Does it anger you that I love you, in spite of my wickedness?"

"Wait!" said Jeremy. "Let me juggle a minute."

Jeremy 'juggled,' that is, he thought for a moment; then of a sudden, he said triumphantly:

"I have it! In the first place, your shame was not a shame, for it was brought on you by charms. In the second place, I forgive you, for I love you still." He took her back in his arms, and she shrank against him. "And as for the bans, I'll break the bans. We'll go see your father and tell him you don't want to marry Leslie. Then we'll have our own bans published."

They sat a moment in silence, unaware that their couch was of frozen mud. A sudden thought struck Flora.

"Had you thought, Jeremy, that there are those who will laugh at you, because of my child?"

"Not to my face, the curs. They won't dare. Listen—when did it happen?"

"A week after you went away."

"Then if you will say as I say, I'll tell it that the stripling is mine."

"Yes."

"You will do as I say?"

"I shall do what you tell me. A wife should do as her husband tells her. It's the law. But, Jeremy, if it should come into the world with horns—because it was gotten in sin?"

"Oh, perhaps a good baptism—"

At that moment they heard a voice. It was Leslie calling his betrothed. And then he discovered Jeremy and Flora.

"Scum of the devil!" he swore. "And so it's Jeremy—who steals other men's goods. She's mine you've got there."

Suddenly, seeing Flora in another's arms, he was smitten again with her desirability and was now ready to fight for her.

Jeremy had sprung to his feet.

"Ah, my wheedling cur! It's me indeed, you son of a bitch! And did you think you could lay hands on mine while I was far away? Thief and a bastard savage!"

It was the last insult a man could give another who had Indian blood in his veins.

"A savage? I?" Leslie cried, growing wilder. "It's you are the bastard savage!"

"Thief!" retorted Jeremy.

"She's mine you've got there! I put my mark on her first."

"You marked her? You?"

"Haven't you any eyes?"

"You are not capable of it," laughed Jeremy.

"I?"

"You haven't the strength. What your vanity would like to claim, I did."

At this startling impudence, Leslie stood a moment thunderstruck. Jeremy saw his advantage and continued:

"To be sure I did it. How did you think you could achieve such a thing alone? In your family, it takes two men to get a child. Thou puny son of a bitch!"

"Son of a bitch yourself!"

As they prepared to spring on each other, Flora cried out:

"Jeremy! You're too starved to fight! He will kill you!"

"Never fear," Jeremy replied baitingly. "He's not man enough—he's not a man at all!"

But Flora's eye had seen rightly. At Charlie's first blow, Jeremy realized how a long winter campaign could sap the strength of a man. But as he charged — he was hardly more than a shadow—to his astonishment he saw Leslie sink to the ground. But the credit was Flora's, who in a fortunate moment had tripped up Leslie with a stick. Instantly the two lovers fell upon him, and he had the sensation of a herd of buffaloes passing over his body.

When he came to, not yet certain that he was alive, Jeremy and Flora had already told the whole story to Lespérance and his wife, swearing reckless perjury, that Leslie's share in the future baby was wholly fictitious.

Then Jeremy remembered that he was one of the heirs of Smith; the proof of it he piled on the table, means for buying the beginning of a beautiful little herd.

Old Mother Lespérance no longer found him so unworthy of becoming her son-in-law. Lespérance himself let the two young people take his horses to go have the names on the bans changed.



X

THE wedding of Jeremy and Flora was set for the third week after Jeremy's return. Thus it had been decided, with the agreement of the parents. And as everything is a pretext for gayety in a country where misery is the daily order, this most recent betrothal was widely fêted.

Jeremy, meanwhile, was building a house, with the help of a levee, that most primitive and touching form of hospitality, when friends and neighbors come to the aid of a hard-pressed man, helping him to build his house, or harvest his field, or in any other way one can imagine. This custom still exists in West Canada among the half-breeds, and today, as long ago, it is still necessary to hold in reserve a jug of whiskey with which to quench the workers. They must be fed solidly, four times a day, and at night-fall a dance must be arranged.

The long lean Morissots, with their soft and intelligent blue eyes, on whose features Indian blood had left no stamp, and who had remained staunch French, still talking of their Norman ancestry; the Gosselins, short and round, with carefree happy faces, drinkers but peaceable, all violinists from father to son; the irascible MacIvors, with their bloodshot eyes, who swore at their horses in English; the dark eager Ouelettes, so given to horse trading that they would unharness their animals in the midst of a furrow to make a deal, always with some little extra gift won in the exchange; the Lengens, ordinarily silent, but who had a way of suddenly breaking loose in a storm of Cree *blague* that was as irresistible as it was unexpected; the Prudens, who could not hold themselves back—old, married, even the grandfathers of numerous broods—from trying out all the girls and women who would let themselves be taken in by fluency and grand airs, but alas! the Prudens were eternally poor. All of these and many more, with great full-chested oaths, were bringing fresh-hewn logs from the woods, which Lespérance skinned with rhythmic blows of the ax.

Jeremy and MacDougall were piling the logs in a square, while Louis Riel, granted to be the best carpenter in Red River, dovetailed the ends, dressed their corners, then with a swiftness of which he was not a little proud, squared them, great chips flying to the touch of his steel.

In four days, the house was reared: twenty-four feet long, eighteen wide, with two rooms below and an attic, which was rare; but it gave the house a look of prosperity, despite the thatched roof and the wild surroundings, where the glazed branches of the 'harts rouges' gleamed amid the silvery verdure of young willows.

With that strange haste which nature manifests in cold climes, the leaves were already showing on the trees, and the grass was sprouting on the marshy prairies, where plovers and sandpipers splashed joyously on their long, gray legs, crying tui . . . tui . . . tui. . . .

* * *

A rider mounted on a lean mustang presented himself one evening and asked to speak to Riel.

He had a foreboding eye, nervous movements, and his young hard face recalled a remembered counte-

nance to Riel. It was quickly realized that he was one of the Hamlin sons, come from the Bourbeuse with fatal tidings.

His brother, hunting antelope on the prairie, had been surprised by the Sioux. The scalped body had been found, around which crows held conclave, disputing the remains with the famished wolves.

Since then, Hamlin and his three other sons had been trailing the murderers across the prairie. The boy, sent as a messenger by his father, announced that the Wolf, with a band of his favorite warriors, was encamped at the moment near Lake Blanc.

Old Hamlin had sworn vengeance and was asking Riel's aid and assistance.

There are things that can not be refused; Riel convoked fifty horsemen, picked from his best men. Charlie Leslie held back, pleading bronchitis, and he would have succeeded in remaining in the settlement if Jeremy, rightly jealous, had not brought down on his rival the full thunder of Riel.

Such were the direct threats of the half-breed chieftain that Charlie Leslie decided to take down his carbine and saddle his horse.

It was his wish before leaving, however, to settle

his account with the McNab witch. It pleased him not at all to think of the old hag in possession of his animals and money, in return for the shabby result she had gotten him.

Before coming to the settlement, at the rendezvous in front of Riel's house, he made a detour into the woods, with the intention of explaining himself to the NacNab crone.

She was peeling a branch of dogwood in preparation for making *kenic-kenic*, squatting in the sunshine in front of the hovel she lived in, rocking her head; moreover, she seemed, as always, on the point of swallowing the end of her crooked nose.

"Ah! There you are, my lad! On the hunt for medicine against the Sioux, I wager. I can make you a first-rate charm. It will cost you but little. Not dear. . . . But what is it that's dearer than this dear life you're going to risk? One understands when one is old. I'll sell you a sachet which you've only to tie to your gun, and there's not a cursed bullet that will be able to touch you. On the other hand, if you are willing to pay the price, I have some grease that smeared on the body with the proper words . . . You can be sure, sure as the judgment, of dying

nowhere but in your bed—in your bed, my lad, in your bed!”

But Leslie had no more faith in charms since Jeremy had triumphed over him. He interrupted the hag:

“I haven’t come for that. Your deviltries are no good, not worth a sou. And perhaps you think I’m going to let you keep my animals I gave you for a charm that didn’t work?”

“What’s that you say? What?” said the old woman, suddenly deaf, whose hearing was so acute she could hear the grass growing.

“I said that you could make ready on my return to give back my animals and money, because your deviltries didn’t work with Flora, and I am not one to pay for what’s no good . . . you hear?”

“But, my boy, you asked me for medicine to win girls. I gave it to you. You’ve had your Flora—given her something to remember you by. Everybody says as much. You know very well that what I gave you was good—”

“Good for nothing! You’re all lies, deviltry—nothing but lies and trickery—”

“Listen well, upstart!” said the old woman,

making a new desperate effort to swallow the end of her nose. "Don't come here to insult me. You owe me respect—"

"And you think I'm one to respect the devil? I've told you already that you're full of lies. And then you robbed me . . . and see to it that you return my cows when I get back."

"And think you," howled the hag, shouting above Jeremy, "that I'll allow myself to be abused by a low wretch such as you? Lies? What do you say, lies? Ah! You would filch my cows! Ah! Believe me as you will, the Sioux are going to kill you. It is plain. Nothing but my medicine can save you."

"Your medicines are all lies."

"Ah! Lies, are they? Lies, are they, my lad! Shall I throw a curse on you, so you may see if they are lies?"

Charlie shrugged his shoulders. But at heart his courage was not holding. Still, wanting someone to turn his anger on, he raised his hand threateningly at the old woman:

"I'll break your bones, you old witch."

"You are villainous enough for it, indeed! But mind you well—" She paused a moment and fixed

Leslie with a stare between the eyes. He had once seen a rattlesnake stare him down in this same fashion, and he had been saved from death only by the shot fired by his father.

"Yes," she continued, after a dreadful silence, "mind it well. . . . You've insulted me—you are going to perish at the hands of Jeremy, or rather the Sioux. You shall die violently—by Astaroth and Beelzebub and by The Gray Bears of The Moonlight, and by the scalp withering on the branch. And by the Young Girl of The Yellow Knives. . . ."

Leslie brought down his whip and the horse started with a gallop. The hooves struck the mud with a resounding pouc-pouc-pouc . . . pouc-pouc-pouc. But the noise could not drown out the pursuing voice of the hag, crying:

"I'm putting the kettle to boil. Take care, Charlie Leslie!"

Riel was already calling the roll when Leslie arrived. The troops were immediately organized in squads of ten, each being commanded by a chief.

Of the first four squads, one was led by a son of Norquay, Riel wishing thereby to show that he appreciated the personality of his rival. Pierre

Dumas led the second, and the third and fourth had Hormidas Ritchott and Tom Lajimonnière as their captains. The fifth squad, composed of the youngest men of the party, among whom were Jeremy, Mac-Dougg and Leslie, was put under the orders of a Delorme who had shown astonishing precocity for war, and in whom Riel had the greatest confidence.

Joseph Delorme was a great square fellow. His limbs were enormous. Quiet, more reflective by nature than most of his elders, known for bravery, he enjoyed a particular prestige in the settlement. He was almost the best marksman of all the *métis*, and he would willingly antagonize the humor of young Gabriel Dumont, whom people accorded a brilliant future. The obstinate and brutal character of Delorme—his well-aimed blows were prodigious—allowed him to take in hand the most undisciplined of the turbulent and noisy young men whom Riel had confided to his command.

The captain—Riel insisted on the title while leading campaigns—thought it preferable to employ the youngsters, as he called them, as scouts. It strikes a chieftain forcibly that youth is adventurous and that it likes galloping across the prairie. Audacity,

even wild and imprudent, is proper and becoming to scouts. But at night, when all these youngsters are spent and worn with fatigue, they think only of sleep, and make but tolerable sentinels. Watchers of the night are drawn best from the ranks of the old.

At the moment Riel was about to cry, "To horse!" Monseigneur Provencher appeared, his regal height bent under the weight of anxiety. Vengeance seemed to him impious. Yet how could he blame the half-breed chief for using force to bring about order and for pacifying the prairie by war, since diplomacy had failed? Alas! Those things would not come to pass without bloodshed, on one side or the other. Was it for Christians to set an example of barbarity? Would not this reasoning of his be interpreted as weakness by the savages themselves? . . . All night long the old priest had prayed in tears that God would enlighten him. He had made Riel the offer to go himself as an ambassador to the Sioux. Having been shown by Riel that such a thing would only expose him to death, he had pronounced the word: martyr. Riel could have sworn that at this minute the venerable head of the old apostle had been surrounded by a halo. But the half-breed had finally

demonstrated to the priest the uselessness of such sacrifice. He recalled the first missionaries who were massacred in fury by the Sioux at the beginning of the century. Force alone could arrive at any goal. After administering a good lesson, one might then try clemency. Monseigneur Provencher had finally given in. That morning he had said mass for the benefit of Riel's men, and every soldier of them, except Charlie Leslie, had received the sacrament from the prelate's hand. He was coming now to say a last good-by and to enjoin them once again not to massacre the prisoners without trial, and above all that they be not tortured, nor scalped. This last was addressed especially to the three Maurins, who already had several atrocities on their consciences.

Those who already were in the saddle took their feet from the stirrups of wood or hide and sprang to the ground. Bridle in hand, they knelt with bowed heads under the benediction of the priest. To Riel was given the privilege of touching his lips to the pastoral ring.

Immediately thereupon, Riel, in a deep voice, gave the signal to horse, and the cavalcade moved off to the cries of men, the clang of armor and the neigh-

ing of horses. The mounts attempted to bite and rear, while the column formed in a long single file, horsemen of unequal height sitting ponies of a most varied assortment.

The first day, since it was improbable that the Sioux should venture so near Red River, Riel, to divert his men, invited them to sing the old refrains.

Songs began to rise:

*Avoine, Avoine, Avoine,
Quand le printemps revient,
Mon père sème de-là,
Mon père sème de-ci . . .*

And then:

A Saint-Malo, beau port de mer . . .

And then a negro wail imported from Louisiana, the refrain of which all sang in unison:

Au pauvre noilère donne un peu de repos . . .

Suddenly MacDouggs turned in his saddle and, winking at Jeremy, began to sing:

*Three of them left together
To have a glass of beer . . .*

Then a chorus of laughs went up, and voices cried:

"Are you not proud, Jeremy? Boy! That's the song of your father-in-law!"

And Jeremy laughed with the others. But mournfulness pressed upon him at the thought of Flora.

* * *

When night fell, the horses, still saddled, grazed at the end of ropes, while the first four squads relayed the night watch. Those not on guard slept on the prairie, on which fell the thick night mist. They were wrapped simply in their blankets, one end of which they pulled down over their heads, while their feet played freely from the other.

When one sleeps under the stars, it is the head that catches cold.

Riel, on campaign, always slept little. He took a light nap of an hour, then lighting his pipe, listened to the noises of the night.

Around him, the prairie grew ensilvered hour by hour, for with the night fell the dew which was freezing. The hoar-frost shimmering on the grass reflected the whole dark starry field of the sky.

Hundreds of excited wolves howled, telling their

mates of felled game, and that they should leave the whelps in their fur-lined holes and come repair their strength and transform the savored venison to milk.

Sometimes the sound of wings would brush the night; cries of migratory fowl would fall from on high; and Riel would try to determine the direction of the aerial voyagers of the night, in order that he might calculate what weather there would be on the morrow.

Several times the chieftain made the rounds of the sentinels. His well-known vigilance kept the watchers alert more than did fear of the Sioux and the feeling of responsibility.

Among the young men there was whispering.

Riel smiled in recognizing the voice of Jeremy, who was talking with MacDougall—of Flora, naturally. At another place, he came upon a form tossing under its blanket and muttering in nightmare. Riel wakened the sleeper to break the fright of the bad dream. It was Charlie Leslie. He stammered a few incomprehensible words, among which the captain heard the name MacNab.

Riel went back with his pipe and sat down at his pony's side.

Two of the horses had become entangled in a dispute.

* * *

The morning of the third day, near the southern point of Lake Pelican—a lake shaped like the bill of that bird—Riel was joined by the young Hamlin. The young half-breed had left again almost immediately after his interview with Riel, on a fresh pony the chief had given him. He had gone back to his father and brothers and again returned to Riel to tell him that the Sioux had not moved for several days.

They were camped on the eastern shore of Lake Blanc, and it would be easy to force a fight by pressing them toward the water. All that was necessary was to take care lest the outposts over the prairie get warning.

According to young Hamlin, the Wolf had scarcely eighty warriors with him. The purpose of the Indians appeared to be a search for good hunting ground for buffalo. Nevertheless—the fate of the eldest Hamlin son was there to prove it—the warriors of the Wolf would not scorn the occasion to enjoy the luxury of hunting men.

The *métis* had covered in the neighborhood of one hundred and twenty-five miles since leaving the post at Red River, and they were now scarcely thirty miles from Lake Pelican.

Riel ordered his men to eat.

It was a precaution against the eventuality, but little probable, of an imminent conflict. He had already decided to make not more than twelve or fifteen miles that day, to halt at a favorable place, breaking camp the next morning an hour before dawn, and to fall on the savages while there was yet little light. Nevertheless, it was advisable to forestall a surprise. It was highly probable that the Sioux, restless from camping several days in the same place, would be desirous of a change. At any moment his men might have to fight, a thing done best when one is not hungry.

Jeremy and MacDougall sat down by each other, talking while they ate. It was required of each soldier that he bring his own provisions. But Lespérance had furnished Jeremy his pemmican, and MacDougall was provided for by Riel. Marie Riel had treated him handsomely, the while grumbling as was her wont.

This stone-like nourishment was eaten heartily. It took a piece of it the size of a fist to appease an ordinary man. But when it was finished, one was fortified for a severe day.

This campaign was not the first for either Jeremy or MacDoug, and both were hoping to come through it fortunately. They knew, moreover, that it was a better plan not to mention the danger.

They could not help noticing, however, that Charlie Leslie, sitting beside them, was not eating, and that his face was strangely agitated. Fear—Jeremy and MacDoug recognized it instantly and made haste to move away to escape contagion.

But what they did not know was that Leslie was beginning to suffer a thousand deaths because of the MacNab woman and her prophecy. A clamminess pervaded him and he twisted about as if he were sitting on a nest of ants.

His face, as he looked at Jeremy, had a direful expression and the fingers of his hands grew white from the strength with which they gripped his carbine. He tried vainly to light his pipe, for some reason unable to achieve it.

* * *

Advancing behind the wedge formation of Delorme's squad, the troops rapidly gained the point designated by Riel.

On the way, they were joined by Hamlin and his sons.

It was with joy that Riel saw the older man approach, gray haired, hard faced, all muscle and bone, with his stiff and ragged mustache. His short stocky legs had given him the name of *Pichou*, the lynx. Hamlin and his sons were brave, clever men, and Riel valued them as illustrious recruits.

The sons at once joined Delorme's men, while the father, after exchanging handshakes, galloped along with Riel. Neither of them was in a humor for speech. Riel continually scanned the horizon; Hamlin's eyes were fixed in a stare on his horse's neck.

* * *

Toward midday, Riel had Delorme send two men ahead as scouts.

The prairie about them was undulating, and it was necessary to guard against surprises. Also, every man had to hold himself ready to spring from his horse at the first signal of the chief.

Delorme selected Jeremy and Leslie. MacDougall

offered to take Leslie's place; he did not wish himself and Jeremy to be separated. But Delorme had his own reasons.

It is useless to send two men to do the work of one. It was obvious that two friends would keep close to each other to talk, and in the end would not give the proper attention to their mission. There was an advantage in sending ahead two men who hated each other, for they would separate and thus spy out a greater territory. And so Delorme held to the order he had first given.

A mile from the place where their comrades were waiting, Jeremy and Leslie disappeared from sight, hidden by a third wave in the prairie.

They were a considerable distance from each other, Jeremy turning obliquely in a direction that took him away from his enemy. He was not noticing Leslie, but calculating in his mind the chances he would have if at the top of the next rise he should come face to face with a prowling Sioux. He thought it desirable to cross this distance as quickly as possible; he put his horse to a gallop.

At exactly that moment, a shot whistled past him, behind his head, almost touching his shoulder. He

could have sworn to it. For years he had been telling about feeling the wind from a bullet lift his hair.

He whirled about, his hair on end and with a feeling of needles prickling the nape of his neck. Charlie Leslie was reloading his gun as if he were a buffalo hunter, pouring powder down the barrel without measuring it and spitting into it one of the bullets he carried in his mouth, in order to shoot the more quickly.

Leslie, hypnotized with his thought of vengeance, never took his eyes from Jeremy, and did not see that on his right a band of riders was galloping down upon him over the rise of a hillock. Before Jeremy could take any action as to Leslie, an arrow had struck and brought down the latter's horse.

Quickly Jeremy discharged his carbine into the charging riders, and one of them plunged from his mount. Whirling his horse about, he dashed full speed toward the place he had left Riel's men. Looking back while he loaded his gun, he saw the flash of knives dancing like flames. The first savages, pressing wild about Leslie, were disputing which of them would scalp him. . . .

An agonized cry pierced the distance, and Jer-

emy, closing his eyes, stopped loading his gun to give his horse a lash with the plaited leather thong swinging from his right wrist.

His eyes were still closed when he heard someone cry:

“Look out, there!”

His horse swerved; although he was not thrown, he had to fight as if against an animal gone mad. Suddenly, he found himself galloping stirrup to stirrup with Janvier Ouelette, whose mouth was open, his eyes popping from his head.

Jeremy heard Riel bellowing:

“Shoot, in God’s name!”

And he let his gun go off at random.

Everything disappeared in a thick smoke. It seemed he was galloping now in the same valley where a moment before he had just escaped death. His horse swerved again to avoid a dark confused mass, and he saw a pool of blood spreading over the green grass. He realized that the thing was Leslie. A pony was writhing in agony near the corpse. He forgot to load his gun again until he became aware of Janvier Ouelette at his side, lifting and firing without checking the speed of his horse. Consciousness

swept back over him enough for him to begin to make out the forms of men and horses lying dead on the prairie. Great bodies, almost naked, painted hideously with ochre, made yet more hideous in death. White teeth glittering and grinning. A convulsive hand opening and closing, as if life were trying to hold on, clutching impotently at the grass. Lying on its side, a piebald pony magnificently caparisoned with spoils taken without doubt from some American soldier. Jeremy recognized the horse and the saddle of the Wolf—he had noted both the day he had come to make peace.

And almost immediately, he realized that everyone was pursuing but one man, who a half-mile away was running with incredible speed. The fugitive was evidently trying to gain the edge of the forest that arose a mile away in the distance, lifting like a green isle on the blue prairie.

The half-breeds, galloping in a single line, had formed a crescent. It was thus wolves hunted, and the savages, learning it from the wolves, had passed it on to the half-breeds. It is rare game that can escape such tactics.

A voice arose, that of Riel:

"Don't shoot, take him alive! It's the Wolf!"

And to a man, the whole line repeated the order:

"Don't shoot! . . . It's the Wolf! . . . It's the Wolf! . . the Wolf! . . the Wolf! . . ." And the echo rang like a many-voiced chant: "It's the Wolf! . . It's the Wolf! . . It's the Wolf! . . ."

They surrounded the wood, sure that the Wolf would take refuge in it, for on the other side the prairie stretched away endlessly, with the azure blue of a little lake gleaming in the distance.

The wind was coming from the east.

Dry grasses, amassed year after year, dotted the ground. Delorme, the first to arrive, sprang without hesitating from his horse and set fire to this tinder. The flames waved up sinuously and swiftly spread over the ground. Trees cracked with hollow groans. Branches withered. A birch wrapped itself from top to bottom in a sinister flame. From all sides fled panic-stricken animals, birds, rabbits, fallow-deer, wolves. A great roebuck paused for a moment to stare at Jeremy, made up its mind and sprang away in bounds over the prairie. He seemed to be pursued by a wolf.

At the end of an hour, in spite of the smoke and

the small fires still crackling, it seemed that the wood must be beaten. This task fell naturally to Delorme's men, and the Hamlins, eager to kill, joined in with them.

The forty or fifty acres of woodland were quickly beaten, yet neither on the ground nor in the sadly withered leaves of the trees did they find any trace of the Wolf.

Some of the men were already beginning to talk of sorcery, of pacts with the devil, when old Hamlin, desperate above all the others, suddenly cried out.

Midway of the wood was a small pool, the one place the fire had respected. Its edges were even still grilled with reeds.

Hamlin pointed out to Delorme fine-pointed moccasin tracks in the mud. The rushes had been trampled.

With the aid of a pole, Hamlin probed a moment in the pool and, suddenly, followed by one of his sons, he leaped into the water, submerged, and the two of them dragged a muddy rag to the bank. The rag, powerless under the merciless strength that held it, was the Wolf.

The Sioux chief had been lying in the pool,

breathing through a hollow reed, one end of which he held in his mouth with the other end thrusting above the water. But Hamlin, the instant the moccasin tracks were seen, had mistrusted the reed, a trick that was not unknown. Thrusting with his pole, he had broken the little reed and almost drowned the Wolf. The result was the easy capture.

Unarmed, the Wolf was put under the guard of two or three young half-breeds; likewise a second savage who, being slightly wounded, had been lassoed by Maurin.

All the other Indians had been killed or mortally wounded, and, although Riel had firmly decided that the dead should not be scalped nor the living tortured, he was indifferent to the agonies of the dying, whose bones would bleach on the prairie and enrich the grass around their miserable resting places.

These unfortunates held stoically to the Indian code of dignity, not one of them making a moan.

Over the field of battle, ponies—most of them spotted—wandered forlornly. And on the white spots of some of them were bloody gashes; flies, drawn by the odor, hummed over the blood and when they settled on the wounds, a shiver would run over the

animals. Here and there ponies would try to throw or bite the young men charged with rounding up the spoils.

In addition to Leslie, two other *métis* had been slain, Roger Morissot and Elzear Ritchott, the brother of one of the lieutenants. Three had been slightly wounded, and Pete Lapointe had received an arrow in his thigh, the point of the weapon being made of a piece of iron hoop-wood, sharpened and barbed, and the shaft, carefully fashioned for the purpose, had been cut where it joined the arrow, with the result that the whole barbed head was sunk into the flesh.

The wound was serious and bled freely. Maurin had a reputation as a surgeon, founded principally on the fact that he was indifferent to the suffering of others.

With the consent of the wounded man, he set to work to operate. His sole instrument was his hunting knife, likewise useful in cutting up game, fleshing hides, whittling wood, and so forth. This knife was also an implement at table.

Lapointe gave the sign, took his rosary in his hand and, held by two young giants whose faces

blanched, he delivered himself confidently to his butcher. Heaven without doubt heard his prayers, for he did not suffer long. He had scarcely time to utter three rending cries, his whole body convulsed, before Maurin had severed the crural artery. The wounded man collapsed instantly with a flow of blood that not all the touch-wood in the world could have checked.

At this spectacle, the Wolf, who until then had maintained a haughty indifference, busying himself cleaning his long black hair of mud, gave a smile of scorn and satisfaction.

Maurin, very calm, was explaining how it was the fault of the wound.

"I knew straightway, boy, he was a man going on a trip. You see them like that, and with a healthy look to the eye, too. You're just a novice. You say to yourself: 'He'll come out of it!' . . . But such things can't fool me. He was born too full of blood. . . ."

Louis Riel then set to work burying his dead. As for the savages, crows were already alighting on their bodies with calls to the rest of the flock. Wolves ushered in the twilight, moaning like ghouls.

And while their lamentations were rising from the four quarters of the horizon, the half-breeds, uncovered, told their rosaries together over the tomb of their own dead.

After a night spent within hearing of the feasting wolves—once or twice human cries told of the wounded living being attacked—they proceeded to the judging of the Sioux chief.

With that respect for form native to the simple, the half-breeds prepared their case in detail, though each one of them knew the Wolf was condemned in advance.

He, too, knew it as well as they, and he disconcerted the majesty of the tribunal by challenging Riel before the trial began:

“To what purpose are these shadows of justice?” he said. “Is it to torture me in dragging out my last hours? In that case you waste your time, O men of false hearts! I can look death in the eye. And I have often done favors, but never asked them.”

After these words pronounced with tight lips, slightly mocking, the Sioux tranquilly took his seat, turned his back on the half-breeds and delivered himself to the cares of his toilette.

He had quitted his leggings of wolf hide, the sole garment of his war costume; fine as a bronze statue, he wiped his bronzed chest with a tuft of grass. The long-tendoned muscles played one over the other under the fine-textured tawny skin. If his fate gave him the slightest concern, it was visible to no eye on earth.

Nevertheless, at his back, Hamlin was hatching the terms of his requisitions and demanding vengeance, while Riel, overtaken with a cold sweat from which his garments stuck to his sides, was asking himself how he would have the courage to pronounce the sentence; he was regretting that in the heat of battle he had not ended the Sioux with a charge from his gun.

Hamlin fortunately was not an orator. Yet it seemed to Riel that the torment he endured listening to the good man repeat himself surpassed human patience. He almost envied the tranquillity of the prisoner.

The captain gathered all of his courage and said:

"Let this man be condemned to death! Hamlin, since this vengeance is thine, it shall be thine to execute it."

Riel scarcely recognized his own voice. When he had finished speaking, it seemed to him that his over-taut nerves were jangling one against the other—the thing which was causing, doubtlessly, that incessant booming in his ears. . . .

Then the Hamlin sons took the savage by the arms and led him to a solitary tree that stood in the vanguard of the forest; passing a rope around his neck, they swung him into the air.

The body swayed a moment like a pendulum, convulsed and grimacing. Moved by pity, and to make sure the chieftain did not suffer uselessly, Riel lifted his carbine and fired. The limbs of the Sioux went slack, as if a spring in his body had been thrown.

The wounded savage was set at liberty, with a mission to tell his brothers that Riel would again offer them an honorable peace.

At once the half-breeds sprang to their horses and disappeared over the prairie. Turning in the distance, Jeremy saw the swinging silhouette cut itself in black on the disc of the setting sun. On high, the crows were flapping joyously.



XI

THE successor of the Wolf having sued for peace, a lasting pact was concluded between the half-breeds and the Sioux, and the hatchet was buried with the usual ceremony; and, to make sure that it would not resurrect itself—as had happened the last time—they planted a maple over the spot where the ceremony was held.

Thirty years later, this same maple could be seen, a sturdy giant under whose shadow families would gather on Sunday for picnics. Since then, a house has taken the place of the tree, and there is scarcely anyone left on Red River who remembers having heard the picturesque tales of the past which made the pioneers dear to the heart; how Louis Riel, father of the great Louis Riel of the insurrections, caused peace to reign over the prairie and thus laid the way for colonization.

But in no country is glory more transient than in Western America. Hardly a man in a hundred knows the name of Cavelier de la Salle, and when La Verendrye—another great forgotten Frenchman—is mentioned, men think of an earldom, an electoral division, but there are none to recall the glories this name commemorates. Louis Riel, the elder, has fallen into complete oblivion, and as for his son, one omits, voluntarily perhaps, to tell children of the events that brought him to the scaffold at Regina, in 1885. But these things came to pass long after the events which we must now return to.

* * *

“My son,” the old bishop was saying to Riel, as they walked together one radiant summer morning around the church, “my son, you are wrong, your ambitions are too vast. I have already told you as much. This royalty you dream of is impossible. Think of the number of enemies that surround you.”

“But,” said Riel, “have I not established peace?”

“On the prairie, yes. In the heart, no. . . . To be sure, your deeds have been heroic, as far as human things can be, and in proportion to your resources. But you will have to fight against the ill-will of the

Hudson Bay Company, which has received these lands honorably and by royal grant—”

Riel harshly interrupted Monseigneur Provencher:

“But what care I for the self-styled rights of this Company? Was there not long ago such a French company which—”

“Yes, but it ceded its rights to the English company.”

“Its rights? And what of ours? How would they have lived if we had not been here, we, the *métis*? I know indeed that every day some emigrant traitor arrives from down there”—he swept his hand toward the southern horizon—“the Benards, the Bonnauds. There are fine people for you, Father—fine Christians, no?”

“They do not fail their religious practices.”

“But they sell whiskey under cover, and their women—”

“And by what right do you judge them?”

Riel bowed his head, for the prelate’s voice had become harsh. Instinct told him, however, that Monseigneur Provencher was wrong, yet the Father continued:

“There are the dangers your royal dreams

run. The Company on one side, England on the other. . . .”

“They will perhaps grow discouraged with sending men here who die with the cold.”

“For every Smith that dies, ten will take his place.”

“And for the ten Smiths who take his place, the winter will be none the less cold.”

The bishop continued as if he had not heard him.

“England first, and then The Company. . . . And do you count as nothing the hostility of Norquay and the ill-will of these newcomers, the Benards, and others you spoke of just now?”

“Yes, because we are *métis* and they, they believe themselves of the purest white race. Did our Heavenly Father die that a white man should be more than one of mixed blood?”

“No, but these men have a power which you have not. They have behind them wise men who are pushing.”

“And who will come to reap what we have sown. I, even I, can see it from here.”

“It is possible. But how shall you fight against them, Riel, tell me?”

"By force. I shall call the *métis* to arms."

"And if you should succeed, blood would be spilled, and I like that not. It is well enough to defend yourself against the savages, for it is a matter of life and death. But for gold! Fie, Riel! As a Christian, you speak strangely. No earthly kingdom is worth the loss of eternal salvation in the world to come."

"But Father—"

"Hear me, Riel! Never will I follow you in these dreams, and were I so inclined, I should yet forbid it, for you were not fashioned to fight such enemies as are yours. Not that I underrate you. I esteem you more than if you were a councillor of the Queen of England. But right, honesty, and a certain ability, are not enough. You do not know the world out there. Be at peace, Riel—beget sons. Increase and multiply, and you will have numbers I doubt seriously immigration can ever surpass. Give me your son Louis as soon as he is of age, and I shall have him taught so that in manhood he may fulfill your dreams of youth. . . . Now I have my breviary to say. Au revoir, Riel!"



Louis Riel, returning along the road, brooded over the sorrows the words of the priest had caused him. He could not help realizing that the Father was right as to him, Louis Riel, but he believed also that the good man had no fair idea of the colony's future.

If the colony remained what it was, a fief of the English crown under the hand of the Hudson Bay Company, one day or another the sight of the prosperous little fields of wheat, each summer becoming larger on the banks of Red River—despite the grasshoppers, floods and droughts, the three scourges—some day these little fields would not fail to open the eyes of some employee who would make a report of them to the powerful stockholders, and these would be tempted to turn this richness to money, without the least thought of those who, from father to son, had suffered to conquer the wild forests and the prairies and stamp them with the first traces of civilization. Yes, men from the East would come, like bears to a hive, devouring all the harvest.

Like most of the half-breeds, Riel had traveled far over the prairies of the New World, from east to west, and he knew the history of these American

plains on which bands of adventurers would come to rest, the cleverest of them, who were also the most rascally, having always on their tongues the words: Civilization, Progress, Justice, Riches, Liberty, and so on. . . . They were heard prating of all sorts of philanthropic theories, until one day one realized that all the good they did, they did for themselves. And their neighbors remained with empty pockets, as MacDougall said. Riel also dreamed of greatness for himself, for like all men he was disposed to personal vanity. But it was his desire to use his power in making a race of the *métis*; not a tribe, but a race with laws appropriate to the land they dwelt in, a free and prosperous people.

Monseigneur Provencher, in a few simple words perfectly fitted to the simple soul of the half-breed chieftain, had just dissipated the great pioneer's illusions, and Riel, at forty-five years, suddenly felt old and helpless, the source of his energy gone dry.

* * *

A field of wheat was trembling like the sea in the wind—a little field coquettishly nestling in a woodland of aspen and oak, fenced about with well-barked poles.

Momently there could be heard, among the mysteries of the underbrush, behind the delicately rose-veined leaves of the wild cranberries, the tinkling of cow bells.

At a turn in the road, Riel saw Jeremy staking his peas. His young wife, her head shaded with a colored handkerchief, followed him along the rows, at the same time playing with her baby.

To distract him from his brooding, Riel opened the gate—willow thews took the place of hinges—and entered the enclosure.

Jeremy turned toward Riel a happy face which three months of marriage had filled out sleekly. When he smiled, his eyes half-closed above his shining, bronzed cheeks. He had been married to Flora since the return of the troops.

It had been a fine wedding, a very fine wedding. Young men on horseback had circled the cart of the newly married, firing off their guns into the air. And then all the horses hitched to carts had gone wild; Napoléon MacIvor even had his arm dislocated when his ponies, taking the bit in their teeth, hurled him against a stump.

Father Letourneau, a lay monk, had pronounced

a magnificent sermon and, as his imagination was more fertile than fortunate, he had made mention of the Magdalene and other allusions that caused Jeremy and Flora to blush to the ears. This confusion had been augmented when the good Father cited Jeremy as a model to be followed. But no one thought of teasing the young couple; encouraged, rather, by the words of the priest, all praised Jeremy, so much so that Veronica MacIvor, the great wench with three bastards, that same day received four proposals of marriage from young men whom one had long suspected, to tell the truth, of having had something to do with this joyous wanton. Yet she chose a fifth, one who having had no commerce in illegitimates, promised himself a child that would indeed be his own. But that is another matter. . . .

They danced three days for Flora and Jeremy, and the besotted grew numerous. But not one of them surfeited himself with such a light heart as did Lespérance.

* * *

The child had just been born, and this was its first outing. As for the mother, the second day after her accouchement, she milked the cows as if nothing

had happened, and everyone complimented Jeremy on having picked a wife who delivered herself so easily. The young father *in partibus* adored the child, and a rosy horizon beckoned to the young family.

* * *

Riel took the baby in his arms, and the hands of the bantling played with the chieftain's beard, that beard which was a thing of no little pride. The mother followed with an anxious air, like a dog whose puppy is being teased.

* * *

North and south stretches the prairie, on to the east and to the west, still awaiting someone to rouse it from its sleep.

Will it be to the brave? Will it be to the strong? Is it numbers it awaits? Its amorous flanks lie prone, waiting for the seed of men. It longs to be the mother of wheat, the grandmother of cities.

North, south, east and west it sleeps: who is to wake it from its dreams?

THE END

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